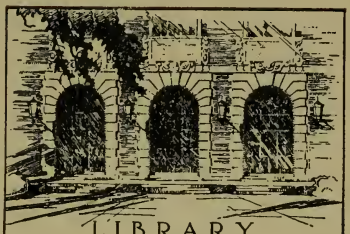
MONA'S CHOICE

Mrs ALEXANDER

AUTHOR OF

"THE WOOING O'T" &c



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MONA'S CHOICE.

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A NOVEL.

BY

MRS ALEXANDER,

AUTHOR OF

'THE WOOING O'T,' 'HER DEAREST FOE,
'THE ADMIRAL'S WARD,' 'AT BAY;' 'BY WOMAN'S WIT,'
ETC., ETC.

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MONA'S CHOICE.

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CHAPTER I.

'TIS WELL TO BE OFF WITH THE OLD LOVE.'

MONA felt younger and more like her old self after this meeting with Lisle than she had done since her grandmother's death. The encounter had proved to her how completely she had cast off the old feeling of regret and pain at her disenchantment, and showed her that she was stronger than of old. Still Lisle in a way interested her. His manners, when he chose, were attractive, though Mona fancied she could perceive the baser

metal of selfishness underlying the silver-plating of his effective exterior.

With all his Radicalism, Uncle Sandy was deeply gratified by the readiness of this fine gentleman to cultivate his acquaintance. He was remarkably amiable and serene during the whole afternoon and evening after Lisle's visit, although he held forth at some length on the folly and evil effect of titles on their possessors, as well as on society at large.

His placidity so soothed Mary Black's nerves that she was able to sing some Jacobite ballads without much trepidation, and in a voice so sweet and true that the absence of training was not perceived.

Uncle Sandy was highly pleased.

'Eh!' he said—a prolonged 'Eh!'—'there's a Scotch song for you, Mona, and a Scotch voice! All the German and Italian growling and screeching couldna equal that! Even yourself noo—you have a pretty pipe of your own, but you canna give me a lilt like that.'

'No indeed, uncle!' said Mona cheerfully. 'One must be Scotch to sing Scotch as Mary does.'

'Can you sing "Bonnie Mary Hay," my lassie?'

'Oh, yes, that I can!'—with a delighted smile. 'It is just father's favourite.'

And Uncle Sandy insisted on an encore.

Then Mona added her share to the concert, and Mary hung in genuine pleasure and admiration over the piano.

'Eh,' she cried, 'but you make the notes speak!'

So Mona proposed to give her a few lessons in piano playing, and all went well and happily.

'She is a douce, weel-edicated bairn,' said Uncle Sandy, when Mona lit his candle and carried it for him to his room —a little attention he always looked for —'and *you* are wiselike to find so bonnie, weel-behaved a girlie to mak' freends wi'—nane of your upsetting taupies wi' neither brains in their heids nor hearts in their bodies. She can bide as long as you like, and sing for me every evening. Mak' them gang to bed, dearie; it's lang burning the lights.'

'My dear Mary, you are a complete success!' cried Mona, when she returned

to the drawing-room, and found her and Kenneth standing very close together in the window. 'I do not know when my poor uncle seemed so happy and content. She will cut me out, Kenneth!'

'Ah! that she never will! Nor would she wish it. It was a lucky hour for us when I met you, cousin Mona.'

'I am glad you think so, Kenneth. Now we are not to sit up burning lights,' continued Mona, laughing.

'There's splendid moonlight, which costs nothing,' returned Kenneth. 'Let us blow out the candles and have a little talk before we go to bed; we have scarce had a word together yet.'

The well-assorted trio sat for some time talking softly in the silvery radiance of the moon, the delicious perfume of the pine trees breathing on the cool night breeze—and then crept quietly to their respective chambers.

Lisle proved a true prophet. The day but one after his visit, Uncle Sandy and his guests had assembled in the library to their five o'clock tea. This was a serious meal, with bannocks and scones,

cookies, bread and butter, preserves, and toast. It served to support nature till eight o'clock supper, after which came prayers and bed. Mr Craig had just 'asked a blessing,' when the sound of an approaching carriage interrupted his attack on the toast and newly-made strawberry jam.

'It is anither visitor,' he said. 'Why, one might as weel be in Edinburgh or London.'

'We had not many visitors in London,' observed Mona.

As she spoke, Jessie, the youthful housemaid, came hastily into the room.

'There is a leddy speerin' for you, Miss Craig!' she exclaimed; 'a gran' leddy, in a chaise wi' twa pownies.'

'It must be Lady Finistoun,' said Mona, rising. 'I may bring her in, uncle?'

'Eh? Surely. Ask her to tak' a cup of tea.'

Mona hastened to the door, before which, in a light basket-carriage drawn by two wicked-looking dun ponies, sat Lady Finistoun, and beside her an elderly lady made up in the most youthful style.

'Ah! my dear Mona! So you are at home. I am so glad.' She gave the reins to a smart, diminutive groom, and stepped out quickly, embracing Mona with effusion. Lady Finistoun continued, 'I was so delighted to hear you were within reach. I have brought Miss Morton with me. You know Miss Morton? No! Oh, well, you ought; everyone knows her.'

'Then I must be no one,' said Mona, laughing. 'I am very glad to see you, Evelyn. You must come in; we are at tea; my uncle begs you will join us.'

Descending the steps, she courteously invited Miss Morton to alight.

'Certainly, with pleasure,' said that lady with much decision; and, followed by both new arrivals, Mona led the way to the library.

Miss Morton was very tall, and rather bony; her long neck was surmounted by a small head and a face short and broad for its size, rather of the pug order, with small, keen, light-brown eyes. Her complexion seemed to have suffered a good deal from exposure to weather, and was considerably and undoubtedly powdered.

She wore a very masculine-looking overcoat of light tweed with a round cape, a small deer-stalker cap, and a white gauze veil tied round it, which at present was turned back with a curious effect. Lady Finistoun wore a heather-coloured costume, exquisitely draped and fitting—trimming, buttons, gloves, hat with a pheasant's wing—all matching to perfection, and admirably becoming to the pretty brunette face and dainty figure of the wearer.

'Uncle, let me introduce Lady Finistoun and Miss Morton to you,' said Mona.

'I am sure I am varra pleased to see ony friends o' my niece,' said Uncle Sandy, rising after two distinct efforts, and smiling on the visitors. Like most Scotchmen, he was much mollified by the sight of a pretty face. 'Ye'll sit doon and tak' a cup of tea or a glass of wine after your drive. Here, Jessie, set a chair for the leddy by me, and bring cups and plates. Where'll the ither leddy sit? Kenneth, mak' room 'twixt you and Mona.'

'Thank you, Mr Craig,' said Lady Finistoun, in her soft, sweet tones; 'a

cup of tea will be most refreshing after our long drive; for I stupidly lost my way, and my groom is a Londoner. I trusted for guidance to Miss Morton, who thought she knew the way, but—'

'I *did* know the way,' interrupted that lady, who was drawing off her gloves in preparation for an attack on the good things before her. 'You know when we came to where the road branched off in the hollow you would keep to the left, though I said it must be to the right. No, thanks, no preserve: I hate sweets. I will take some cream scones and one lump of sugar, please.'

'I was so pleased to find Mona was here,' resumed Lady Finistoun, as soon as her wants had been attended to. 'I knew you lived here, Mr Craig, for I have often heard Mona speaking of Uncle Sandy'—a fascinating smile and upward glance—'but she is such a bad correspondent, she never let me know she was here; and if St John Lisle had not come over to dine, we should not have found you out for ages. You take good care of her, Mr Craig. I never saw her look

so well—not even when you came out, Mona.'

'There is a remarkable fine air here; it's better than what you have over in Strathairlie,' he returned. 'You see, we are sheltered frae the north, an' we get mair sun—forbye the porridge. I have just insisted on her takin' porridge to her breakfast.'

'Porridge is exceedingly indigestible, and bad for the complexion,' said Miss Morton, between the mouthsful of cream scones.

'You're wrang!' cried Uncle Sandy. 'Just look at the men and women that are reared on porridge! There's no their equals to be found on earth!'

'My dear sir, I don't imagine you have seen much of earth beyond your native land.'

'You're wrang there again, mem. I've just come back from over a year's wandering wi' my niece about the Continent of Europe; and there's little I saw there that I'd care to tak' awa.'

'Ah, I see you are one of the large class who think their geese swans.'

'I'm much obliged for your high opeenion, mem; but I am no such a fule-body. I have the maist intelligent men of all times on my side.'

'Miss Morton has an intellectual love of argument,' said Lady Finistoun soothingly, 'and is generally in opposition to the foeman she considers most worthy of her steel. But I am anxious to see your charming gardens, if there is time after tea. Sir St John Lisle tells me it is a gem of a place.'

'Weel I hope you will come as often as you like to look at it,' returned Uncle Sandy.

'It is admirably situated. A family place, I suppose?' asked Miss Morton, passing up her cup.

'Naw!' exclaimed Uncle Sandy; 'I bought it wi' my ain hard-earned money.'

'Oh, you lucky man! Of all powers, the one I envy most is the power of making money.'

'You have quite enough, dear,' said Lady Finnistoun. 'Now, my dear Mr Craig, I want you to spare my cousin to me for a few days. It is so long

since we were together, and as we have rather a pleasant party, and the change—'

'She's no your cousin,' said Uncle Sandy hastily; 'she has no kin except me. Her grandmother's kin fell from her when she most needed them.'

'But she is indeed my cousin; and through her I claim you, too, my dear Mr Craig, as a kinsman, if you will permit the claim.'

'It would be hard to say ye nay,' he returned, a smile puckering up his self-satisfied face. 'Mona may please herself.'

'Do you always wear the kilt?' said Miss Morton abruptly to Kenneth.

'Mostly, when I'm amang the heather.'

'It's very becoming,' said she, with an admiring glance. 'I do not wonder at Highland gentlemen wearing it; but you are all very conceited.'

'I am sorry you think so.'

'Don't you admit it?'

'I am not sure.'

'Ah! that is the cautious Scot all over. Tell me, are you his nephew?' nodding in the direction of Mr Craig.

'I am.'

'And Miss Craig's brother?'

'No; my name is Kenneth Macalister.'

'Ah! Highland to the backbone. Then is this young lady your sister?'

Kenneth and Mary blushed simultaneously.

'I see. No; certainly not,' returned Miss Morton, with a harsh laugh. 'Now, Mr Macalister, the room is rather warm; haven't you a shrubbery or a garden, or something to show me? I don't care to sit here any longer.'

Kenneth rose reluctantly.

'Oh, yes, I can take you for a stroll.'

'I am going to look at the grounds,' said the resolute spinster to her chaperon, 'with Mr Macalister.'

'My niece will—' began Uncle Sandy, but Miss Morton promptly interrupted him.

'Oh, no, thank you; I don't want any young ladies; a Highlander is enough for me;' and she walked off, followed somewhat sheepishly by Kenneth.

'Milly Morton professes not to like women,' explained Lady Finnistoun, laughing.

'Mair's the pity,' said Uncle Sandy dryly, 'for I'm thinking few men would like *her!*'

'I assure you they do. She is very popular, and has had endless offers—to be sure, she has a good fortune.'

'Weel, weel! siller is nae everything in a wife. Noo, if you'll tak' nae mair tea, I'll go round the grounds with you myself.'

'Thank you;' and Lady Finistoun satisfied her host's heart with exclamations of admiration and delicately-administered flattery.

'Well, my dear sir, I must tear myself away. The shades of evening will be round us before we reach the Lodge, and I have not settled about Mona's visit.'

'I just leave it to herself.'

'What do you say, Mona?' turning to her.

'I think, dear, you had better not trouble about it. I do not care about going to you when you have a party; and I do not like to leave my uncle, so I shall wait till you and Lord Finistoun are alone, then I will spend a day with you, if you will have me.'

'This is sheer nonsense. Finistoun charged me to secure you. Bertie is coming too, and Lord Arthur Winton, and St John Lisle. They will all be so pleased to see you.'

'It sounds very ungracious, but I really have not the least wish to see them.'

'Yes, it *is*, *most* ungracious; is it not, Mr Craig?'

'Eh, I am no judge. Mona knows her own mind.'

'Well, Mona, you cannot refuse to come to me next Thursday, the twenty-first. It is my boy's birthday. He will be a whole year old. You *must* come!'

'No, I cannot refuse. On that day I will dine with you. I want to see the dear baby again.'

'Thank you, dear Mona! He has grown such a darling! Is there any use in trying to persuade *you* to join us, Mr Craig?' she added insinuatingly.

'Not the least. I should nae be company for a set o' gay callants! I am a thoughtful mon and puir frail body.'

'I think it would do you good to come to us. However, I shall hope Finistoun

may succeed in persuading you. Now, where has Miss Morton wandered to with that good-looking Highlander? It will be dark before we can get home.'

'I think they went round by the big oak,' said Mona. 'I will go and look for them.'

When found, Miss Morton proposed—as it was only three miles to the Lodge by the short cut over the hill—to walk back under Kenneth's escort, a suggestion which evidently alarmed him.

This Lady Finistoun decidedly negatived.

'Don't talk such nonsense, my dear. Mr Macalister would not get back till midnight, and you would be too late for dinner. Three miles over a hill top are equal to six on a flat road. Come, let us be going.'

'You are a little tyrant,' said Miss Morton.

'Will you walk with me to the gate, Mona, while they are bringing round the ponies. I am sure Mr Macalister will come so far with Miss Morton.'

'With pleasure!' cried Mona.

Having bid a cordial farewell to Uncle Sandy, and a civil good-bye to Mary,

Lady Finistoun slipped her arm through Mona's, and they walked slowly down the approach.

'I have been dying to ask you a hundred questions, dear!' she exclaimed. 'What a droll, intensely Scotch Scotchman your uncle is. Quite a character! I am sure he is very rich. Has he adopted you? Is he going to leave you all his money? Is "young Lochinvar" a lover, or a rival near the throne? Tell me everything.

Mona laughed, and gave Lady Finistoun a slight sketch of the situation, in which that sympathetic young peeress was immensely interested.

'The "braw Hielandman" is no doubt an excellent person,' she said; 'but I should like to see you sole heir to your uncle's wealth. I suppose he is very rich?'

'Not according to your standard, I imagine,' returned Mona, 'though I believe he could make Kenneth independent, and me, too; for I have found that woman wants but little here below to make her happy. Money cannot buy what is most essential.'

'Oh, of course not! Still one wants a

few necessaries. I often wonder how poor Geraldine will get on. She will not hear of the horrors which wait on poverty.'

'May I,' began Mona, with a slight hesitation, 'may I send my love to your mother? I am so fond of her. And you know she had a right to be angry with me. I did not behave well to—'

'To poor Leslie Waring!' put in Lady Finistoun, as she hesitated. 'No, you did not! Now, I daresay you are sorry for it?'

'I am very sorry I pained him, but I am very glad I did not marry him. It would have been bad for both of us.'

'Perhaps so. At anyrate he is gone to the bad, so some one was telling me. He lost heaps of money on horses and at Monte Carlo; and he got into an awfully fast set; then he disappeared. They say he was last seen ploughing or breaking horses, or some such thing, in Texas. So, after all, he might have ruined you as well as himself if you *had* married him.'

Mona was silent. Some voice in her heart told her that had she been his wife, the tender consideration he had always

shown for her would have kept him straight. But she answered the suggestion by the old counter question, 'Am I my brother's keeper?'

'It grieves me to hear such an account of him,' she said, after a few moments' silence. 'He was kind and generous, and deserved a better woman than I am.'

'Oh, you were always good! I am sure we were all fond of you. My mother took your refusal to marry Mr Waring dreadfully to heart; but Sir Robert would not let her write to you. He was awfully angry. Then you know what heaps of things she always has to do, so I suppose she gradually forgot.'

Mona was silent. While Lady Mary Everard forgot, she might have starved, though she acknowledged that she had no claim on Sir Robert Everard and his wife. Thank God! there were true souls to be found with hearts *and* memories.

'You know, Mona, you are really lucky,' Lady Finistoun was saying, when Mona listened again. 'As soon as you threw away one fortune, you picked up another. I can see that the dear uncle is very fond

of you, so—but,' interrupting herself, 'I hear the carriage. Yes! and I protest Milly Morton has entrapped the handsome Highlander to come so far with her. She is an awful flirt,—can't live without it, in fact! She makes such a fool of herself sometimes.'

Then came leave-taking, and the visitors drove off as the soft gloom of an autumnal night began to deepen in the east.

'Do you mind walking back by yourself?' asked Kenneth. 'I am going up the hill a bit to speak a word to Allan, the shepherd.'

'Oh, no. I am only a few steps from our own road, and there is nothing to fear among these delightful hills.'

'That's true. I'll be back before supper,' and Kenneth went swiftly on, with a free, swinging step.

The sound of his footfall had hardly died away than another caught Mona's ear, and seemed to gain upon her. In spite of her assertion that 'there was nothing to fear,' she felt an odd uneasiness that, though not absolutely fear, was

unpleasant; nor was she surprised when a voice behind her said, 'Good evening, Miss Craig! I did not hope to find you so far a-field.' Then she was obliged to pause to turn and greet Lisle, who soon overtook her. He carried a gun on his shoulder, and was followed by a gillie with a gamebag.

'This is a piece of luck! I was shooting in this direction, so thought of taking Craigdarroch on my way back, to tell your uncle that I have had no reply from Balmuir.'

Mona was annoyed at this *rencontre*. She wanted to walk back alone in undisturbed thought. The report of Waring she had just heard had affected her. She was so sorry for him! And now came Lisle to stir up the less worthy side of her nature—for Mona was by no means an angel all round. She had debated with herself how she should treat him; not with resentment—that, she told herself, she had no right to feel; not with cold avoidance, which was her natural inclination, and which he would interpret into an expression of displeasure; but with friendly, good-humoured indifference. If,

as he seemed disposed to do, he again tried to amuse a passing hour by making love to her, she would accept it in a spirit of fun which should show out at intervals. He should never flatter himself again that he made any serious impression on her.

'Can I not take the message for you?' she said, looking up, with a demure smile. 'It is a steep road to climb after your day's tramp over the muir.'

'What! and leave your fair side all unguarded, lady?'

'Oh! my fair side is accustomed to take care of itself very successfully.'

'Then may I confess to a low-minded hope that your uncle may ask me to dinner? — though, by the way, I am scarcely fit to present myself.'

'A hope I must nip in the bud! We have dined.'

'Great powers! Well, I need not lose this precious chance of speaking to you. I suppose I shall never see you except through a haze of Highland relations?'

'No; it is not very likely.'

'If you knew how anxious I am to ask

you a variety of questions, you would give me some opportunity of a *tête-à-tête.*

'You can ask as many as you like! I have no secrets.'

'What! does your uncle know you refused Waring?'

'How do *you* know I did?'

'Oh! I know how desperately in love he was, and it is currently reported that you did, and that he went to the bad in consequence!'

'Nonsense!' returned Mona, a grave, hard expression replacing the smile which had played round on her lips. 'You and I, Sir St John Lisle, have seen enough of the world we live in to know that women seldom have sufficient influence to make or mar any man's life.'

'I am not so sure! I fancy if any women ever had, you would be one of them.'

He looked sharply at her as he spoke.

She laughed naturally and merrily.

'Considering the sort of women who are most influential, I do not think your opinion flattering.'

'Why, do you not think good women influence us?'

'Not often, I fancy.'

'You have grown worldly-wise since we met, Mona!'

'Does an absence of nearly four years make you more familiar with my name than you used to be?' she asked coldly.

'Yes,' he returned, looking down into her eyes, 'because I have thought of you so often, and called you Mona in my heart since we parted.'

Mona met his eyes very steadily, while an amused expression crept into her own.

'Call me what you like in the inner region you term heart, but pray let your lips conform to the usages of this mundane society in which we live and move and have our being,' she said carelessly.

Lisle was silent for a moment.

'I accept your rebuke,' he said, 'and will not again offend.'

'Oh, I did not mean to rebuke!' said Mona good-humouredly,—'only to remind.'

'You have changed enormously!' resumed Lisle. 'You seem years older.'

'Thank you! That is a rare compliment.'

'I will not be chaffed into retracting it I meant that you seem more mature; and I find, as I always do, that the fruit is more heavenly sweet than even the blossom.'

'Yet I imagine that anticipation is always better than fruition,' said Mona, quite unmoved by the implied compliment.

They walked a few steps in silence, then Lisle exclaimed,—

'What banishment it must be for you to live here with these very excellent people!'

'On the contrary, I feel quite at home. I am fond of my uncle, because he is fond of me, and I find life quite endurable.'

'Do you always love those who love you?'

'Yes, always.'

'Except in poor Waring's case?'

'That was the exception which proves the rule. Probably I should have been wiser had I conformed to your sound advice,' turning to him with a frank, sweet smile, 'but I cannot say I repent my rejection of it.'

'I fear,' said Lisle gravely, 'that you

no longer consider me a friend, as you used?'

'On the contrary, I am very pleased to welcome such a friend, after his long absence!'

'Thank you,' and Lisle walked beside her in silence for a few minutes. 'I see Lady Finistoun has not been long in finding you out,' he resumed. 'I met her just before I overtook you; she was accompanied by that fearful female, Miss Morton; have you ever met her before?'

'Never!'

'I wonder you have not. She is ubiquitous. She was the first person I recognised when I reached Bombay, and one of the first when I reached Kirktoun. I wonder Lady Finistoun lets her make even a temporary settlement at the Lodge?'

A few more unimportant sentences brought them to the house, where they found Uncle Sandy enjoying forty winks, while waiting till the darkness had deepened sufficiently to render the lamp necessary. Mary was seated on the steps leading to

the garden, reading by the fast-fading light.

'Eh! what's wrang?' cried Uncle Sandy, rousing up confusedly.

'Sir St John Lisle has come to see you, uncle.'

'What's his wull?' in an irritated tone.

'I am very sorry to disturb you; but I did not like to pass your house without calling to say that I have had no answer as yet to my letter, so we will keep well this side of the supposed boundary, and get into no trouble, till the matter is decided.'

'Weel it canna be helpit.'

'No, certainly not. May I leave you a couple brace of grouse, Mr Craig? They are good plump birds.'

'I am much obliged to you. They are fine and digestible food. Where are they?'

'The gillie is just outside with my bag.'

'Mona, ca' Phemie to tak them!'

'Then I will not trespass on you any longer. Pray young ladies, do you not

feel disposed to put me on my way? The moon is rising, and the walk back would be charming?'

Mary looked at Mona, evidently ready to return her good offices if necessary, but the other laughed, and said they could enjoy the view from the window without the trouble of walking. Lisle reproached both for refusing his request, and bidding them a gay good-night, departed on his homeward road.

'Aweel, I did na' want to hear he had nae letter?' murmured Uncle Sandy. 'I'd rather have my bit doze than a' his birdies!' and settled to his nap again.

'Ah!' whispered Mary Black, 'it's not the letter that brought him here. I am afraid but you are a hard-hearted lassie, Mona! He is a handsome, grand-looking gentleman.'

'He is not nearly as good-looking as Kenneth,' said Mona, laughing at Mary's evident delight in the discovery she thought she had made.

Meantime Lisle walked rapidly downhill in the direction of the hotel where

he and his friend put up, and thinking very earnestly of the interview he had just had.

In the new scenes and occupations of his life in India, he had lost much of the impression which the little episode of his intercourse with, and parting from, Mona had left.

Her breaking with Waring, after having accepted him, had been a mystery he could not fathom. As she seemed indifferent to himself, why did she not marry a rich, easy-going fellow, who would do anything for her? Had she fallen in love with any other man? Had she a secret history, which might account for her eccentric conduct?

'However that may be, she was fond of me once, in a proud, shy, reluctant way,' he thought. 'I was certain of it till that day when she took my advice about Waring so differently from what I expected. By Jove! I am right too! I have felt her tremble when I put my arm round her in a waltz, and it nearly made me make a fool of myself. What a charming figure she

has. Her eyes too, they are darker and softer — but steady! There is a curious look of resolution in them when they meet mine. If I were her grandfather, she could not treat me with more friendly composure; she is gently, kindly indifferent, or acts it admirably, while I—I am harder hit than ever! I don't think I have myself so well in hand as I used. I must not be an ass, but I must and will break down that barrier of profound reserve she masks so cleverly behind her sweet, careless frankness. Does she resent the part I played? Pooh! A woman always forgives a lover who comes back with fresh fire after a short estrangement. I don't quite understand her—I must be careful. She is a most dainty morsel, and if I succeed—well I can afford myself even a wife according to my fancy now! and not be too much hampered with her after the bloom is off the grape! How in Heaven's name did she come to have such an uncle? She looks thoroughbred, if ever a woman did! There is a sort of conscious power about her

smile that stings a fellow's pride. I wonder if she is thinking of me? or of that other possible lover, whose existence would explain much? I wonder if that word of counsel I ventured to offer still rankles? Dare I explain it away? No, I dare not approach the subject. Well, I know women pretty well — give me time, and I think I shall win this puzzling girl. No one ever took such a hold on my heart — no, my fancy, before.'

CHAPTER II.

EDGED TOOLS.

IT was, on the whole, a bright time at Craigdarroch. Mona found Mary a very pleasant companion, — a quiet, kindly, sensible girl, whose hearty admiration and profound faith was a gratifying tribute to her new friend. Uncle Sandy's uneasy pride had perhaps never before been so satisfactorily fed, and, like all things thus satiated, was lulled to sleep for the present. If at any time the currents of his temper flowed from the east, it was against Kenneth they chafed; and Kenneth was more inflexible than formerly. It was a great relief to Mona to have a partner in her readings and

writing and general care of Uncle Sandy. Moreover, Mary had learned to play chess with her father, the schoolmaster, and allowed herself to be beaten with much tact—occasionally winning to keep up the illusion.

Amid this temporary tranquillity and comfort, Mona often thought of her dear, kind Deb; not that Deb would care for a life of inactivity and seclusion —busy days, occasional theatres, concerts, and soirees, where she might display a dainty and becoming cap, this was the existence which suited her. But by her own heart Mona knew what a blank her absence left in the warm-hearted, bright-spirited woman's life. She was therefore a most steady and satisfactory correspondent, giving a weekly picture of her days, and descriptions of her readings and musing. She made, however, very slight mention of Lisle; but slight as it was, it sufficed to set Madame Debrisay off.

'Your letter, as usual, reached me on Saturday. I can't tell you how I look forward to it; and it's like you, dear,

to be so faithful in writing. You seem to have far better weather than we have in London; it is warm and damp, and the streets as greasy as if all the tallow-chandlers in town had poured grease over them. People are coming back, and my days getting filled up, so I feel less lonely than I did at first. Is it not a queer turn your meeting that nice, elegant Captain Lisle away there in the wilds. I always thought, and always will think, that he was a great admirer of yours; and if he had not been sent off to India just when your poor grandmother died, there's no knowing what might have happened. I hope, dear, you will not turn up your nose at him as you generally do—Lady Lisle would look well and suit you well. How does your uncle put up with such a thorough-going aristocrat? I hope you are keeping him (Uncle Sandy) well in hand; you must always remember the old lines, "Tender-hearted stroke the nettle," etc., etc.; and a Scotch thistle requires a firmer grip than anything else! I am not sure I like all you tell me about

your new friend Miss Black. Don't let her, or Kenneth either, get too strong a hold on the old gentleman. The Scotch are deep and deceitful, I have always heard. Now for some of my own news. I have some new pupils —two daughters of a Mrs Rivers, who has lately come from India, and is giving these girls finishing lessons before taking them back with her. Lady Hayter recommended me. One of them (Miss Rivers, I mean) has as much ear and as much voice as a crow. I told her mother it was robbery to take her money, for I could do her no good, and she wasn't pleased. The other girl has a sweet little pipe enough, so I go on with both of them. This, however, is a twist in the stream of my narrative. A few days ago I had stayed over my time, and Mrs Rivers asked me to come in to luncheon. I was starving—talking and singing make one fearfully hungry—so I went in. They were very pleasant, and had a nice curry.

'Presently a General something was announced, and a very grand old warrior marched in.

'A great, tall, thin man—a bag of bones you might say—with big black eyebrows, and angry-looking eyes; but his hair was white and his face brown, and he had an empty sleeve. He was named to me and gave me a stare, as much as to say, "Who the deuce are you?" Then he began to talk in short sentences, and with what we might term a "staccato fortissimo" manner. Somehow his eyes and voice seemed familiar to me, only I could not find a clear place for him in my memory. When he had eaten some curry—and abused it—and taken a glass of hock and seltzer, he said, looking at me as if he was going to accuse me of murder,—

'"What did you say this lady's name is?"

'"Madame Debrisay," said Mrs Rivers.

'"Humph!" said he; "are you a Frenchwoman?"

'"No," said I; "but I am next door to one—I am Irish!"

'"From what part of that unfortunate country, may I ask?" more politely.

'"From Ballykillruddery."

'"Ah, I thought so!"

'And he was silent for a bit; then he said, with a pleasanter smile than I thought his grim face could put on,—

'"I see you have no recollection of me."

'"Your voice and face are not strange to me," I said, my heart beginning to beat, "but I cannot recall your name."

'"Have you quite forgotten a gunner called Fielden—Mark Fielden—who won the cup at the Ballykillruddery hunt races in '53, more than thirty years ago?"

'"Do I not? And I helped to do up my cousin Rose Nugent's hair with ribbons of his colours for the race ball! I know you now, and I must shake hands with you!"

'So we shook hands; and his brown face softened and glowed while he talked of Rose. He was desperately in love with her, and they were engaged. He went off to India; she stayed at home —got a wetting out boating, took cold, and went off in a decline. He married, and lost his wife, and now he is wandering about in indifferent health. I

should not have mentioned all this if it had not been for a bit that will interest you. In the course of conversation, it turned out that the General is some relation of poor Mr Waring's, and he is awfully vexed with him. It seems he has got through a heap of money, and has gone away to America. A friend of the General's saw him breaking horses last spring somewhere in California. I said I had met him, and what a good fellow I thought him. Then the General said he was an ass, and had let himself be knocked out of the running because he could not get the girl he wanted to marry him. Of course I did not let on that I knew anything about it, and the subject dropped. Then my old General asked for my address, and said he would come and see me some Sunday—which, I told him, was my only free day,—but I don't fancy he will.

'Now, my darling, I have prosed long enough, and I must stop. When shall I see you again? Can't you persuade your uncle to come up to town for a little more physic? You make him too happy

and comfortable. I was going to write, "Don't refuse Sir St John Lisle without thinking twice," but I will not. Matrimony is a tremendous experiment, and I'll not venture to recommend it. God bless you, my own dear. My best respects to your uncle. — Ever your loving friend, GERALDINE DEBRISAY.'

Mona read this with the deepest interest. She smiled at the account of the meeting at Mrs Rivers', but grew very grave over the description of Waring's decadence.

'Am I to blame? I wish I were not always having sidelong reproaches flung at me. He would have been as bad or worse, if I had married him, for I could not have been a loving, sympathetic wife, and then his last state and mine too would be worse than the first. How I wish I could hear that he was well and happily married.'

The remembrance of his pained expression and quivering lips when he left her—after she had broken with him—haunted her for some time, as it always

did, after it had been roused by any allusion to her rejected lover. But her housekeeping cares, the demands of Uncle Sandy, the pleasure of a ramble with Mary, helped to banish these unpleasant thoughts.

The Thursday on which Mona was to have a peep once more at the world she felt she had quitted for ever, rose fresh and clear after yesterday of storm and rain.

Lady Finistoun had offered to drive over after luncheon and fetch her, so Mona—relieved from the necessity of taking out Uncle Sandy's ramshackle conveyance—dressed, and having put up a carefully-arranged dinner dress and change of raiment, waited quietly for her ladyship's appearance.

Uncle Sandy had driven away early with Kenneth to a sale of Highland cattle at Kirktoun, and Mary had gone to carry some jelly to the shepherd's mother, who was old and weak.

Mona was reading a review sent her by Madame Debrisay, when she heard the sound of a carriage driving up.

'She is earlier than I expected,' was her mental comment as she glanced at the clock. 'It is barely half-past three.'

Voices were heard speaking in the hall, and Mona rose intending to go out and meet her friend, when the door opened, and Lisle entered unannounced, his hat in his hand, looking bright and brown. Mona coloured in spite of herself.

'Good-morning,' he cried cheerily. 'I hope you will forgive a change of plans. Lady Finistoun finds she must drive in to Kirktoun to meet Major and Mrs Menteith—Finistoun's sister, you know—so I offered myself and my dogcart to convey you to the Lodge. I hope you will forgive the change.'

Mona was silent for an instant, while she took a rapid view of the situation. That she was annoyed at being caught in such a trap, need not be said. She did not, however, see any way out of it, and her first care was to hide any symptom of annoyance from the gay cavalier who stood awaiting her commands.

'Oh! I have nothing to forgive,' she

said, smiling. 'If you do not mind taking me and my dress basket, I am ready to start.'

'Well said,' cried Lisle exultingly. 'As it is a fine clear afternoon, and we have plenty of time, I will take you round by Balmuir; the views are splendid nearly all the way.'

'Very well,' said Mona, who had now recovered herself. 'Everyone is out except myself; but would you not like to put up your horse?'

'No, thanks! he is quite fresh. I have only come over from Kirktoun, where, if I am not much mistaken, I saw Uncle Sandy and young Macalister struggling among a mob of wild-looking cattle,' and he smiled significantly.

'Yes, they went to buy some of the creatures,' returned Mona, with an answering smile.

'Shall we start?'

'Yes! I will leave a message, and be with you directly.'

In a few minutes Mona was perched beside her charioteer, her light dress basket hoisted up and confided to the

care of the groom—who sat behind—and they were off.

Lisle was a practised whip, his horse steady and powerful. The vehicle was easy, and Mona—leaning back and completely mistress of herself—enjoyed the air, the view, the motion; yes, and the easy talk, the carefully-veiled admiration of her companion, which formed a pleasant undertone.

'I hope there are not many very steep hills,' she said, after a few moments' silence; 'I am not too courageous.'

'No, the road is safe and easy! I know the country; I was here for a whole season with Finistoun a few years ago, the autumn before *you* were presented. That is a sort of epoch to me.'

'Much more so to me!' she returned, laughing. 'I well remember the heart-sinking with which I looked forward to making my courtesy under the eye of royalty. Do you know I sometimes think all that must have been a dream.'

'I fear the waking cannot have been very pleasant,' said Lisle, bending his eyes upon her.

'I have nothing to complain of! There is not so much difference between one style of life and another, as a man like you would think.'

'A man like me?' said Lisle. 'What am I like?'

'Like your fellows, I suppose. Life to you and to your peers, without horses and dogs, shooting and hunting, clubs, races, and, for the more ambitious, politics, would be something intolerable. Now, a regular occupation, by which you earn your bread, and slowly but surely improve your position, answers all the purposes of these costly amusements; but I will not bore you by prosing—'

'Suppose I enjoy listening to the tones of your most sweet voice, will you not indulge me by a little more?'

'Oh, I have lost the thread of my discourse. I only want to say that now time has accustomed me to the loss of poor, dear granny, I think I am very happy.'

'But there is one piece of your life about which I am profoundly interested, and would like to inquire into, if you would permit me.'

'Yes; I do not mind telling you anything of that kind.'

'There was a period after Mrs Newburgh's death, when you had left the Everards', and had not yet disinterred your uncle. How did you get through that time?'

Mona laughed.

'A dear good soul took me in—a lady who had been my music mistress, and she showed me how to earn my living under her guidance. I attained to the proud eminence of earning about seven pounds a month. It was very nice, I assure you, to feel the money was my own.'

'Great heavens!' ejaculated Lisle. 'And you preferred this to marrying a man of wealth!'

'You must know how delicious the sense of independence is. Do you think a woman cannot feel it too?'

'And does love count for nothing?'

Mona laughed again.

'Yes, I suppose with the real upper class of human beings, it counts for a good deal. It is part of the sum, however, I have not yet worked out. Tell

me something of your Indian life. You see I reciprocate the interest you take in my *history*.'

'I do not think you reciprocate at all,' returned Lisle, with a wistful look, which she met steadily, a slightly mocking smile in her own.

Lisle's brow contracted; but he had a good deal of tact and self-control, and he immediately started a light, amusing sketch of his life, so far as society, travelling, and hunting went, and time flew pleasantly.

What a well-bred, intelligent voice he had! What an indescribable air of superiority and command. No, Mona was not surprised at her early weakness for her companion, but she did wonder that he seemed so ready to make love to her again. She was not at all aware that she was exceedingly attractive, nor that the fair promise of her early girlhood had been amply fulfilled, while the shy reserve which had partially shrouded the brightness of her understanding had ripened into a delightful soft tranquillity, suggesting the wealth of thought and feeling that slumbered beneath it.

She listened with evident interest to all he said, often questioning him, and so they drew near the end of their journey,—of the *tête-à-tête* which Lisle had schemed to secure, and he had not moved her pleasant, friendly ease by one instant of hesitation or confusion. His most unmistakable insinuations, his most killing glances, only produced half-amused, half-kindly smiles.

Lisle was furious, mortified, and more in love than he ever was since his boyish days. Should he have to tell her in so many words that he adored her, and sought her for his wife, in order to extract any recognition from her? If she were cold, if she shrank from him, or repelled him, he could understand it, and he would know how to act; but this frank, charming kindness, this readiness to be with him! It was an invisible, impassable fence which he did not seem capable of breaking down. 'If I could but ascertain whether I have a rival or no,' he thought, 'I should know what to do. I suspect she is playing a part. What is her object? To be Lady

Lisle? That would be object enough to most women; but, though I have long ceased to believe in angels, Mona is something different, or she never would have chosen poverty in preference to Waring. Well, I'll try what cool friendship will do, with a dash of flirting in other directions.'

'There is the Lodge,' he said, pointing to a long, low building, or collection of buildings, which lay in a hollow beneath them, the wild moorland round it, and some huge grey rocks behind. 'The position is not comparable to Craigdarroch, and it must be cold and bleak enough in winter. But I suppose no one stays here in winter.'

'I fancy my uncle will,' said Mona, 'and I cannot say I like the prospect. I shall try and get leave of absence for a few weeks, to pay a visit to Madame Debrisay.'

'Who may she be?'

'Do you not remember seeing a lady who used to teach me singing?'

'I do remember!—a good-looking woman with dark eyes. I well remember

stealing into the drawing-room at Green Street, and listening to you while you were quite unconscious. What a shy bird you were in those days!'

'I was indeed! How curious it seems to look back *now!* Well, that was the lady who took me in when the Everards turned me out—though I turned myself out.'

'And where does she live?'

'In what you would consider inaccessible wilds, but—' as the sound of a rapidly-approaching carriage made her turn, and she interrupted herself to exclaim,—'Here is Lady Finistoun and her visitors!'

They were alongside almost as she spoke.

'So glad I have overtaken you!' cried Lady Finistoun, saluting with her whip. 'I wanted to be at home to receive you. Let us pass, Sir St John.'

Lisle drew to one side, and whipping up her ponies, Lady Finistoun dashed on at a rapid pace.

At the door were assembled Miss Mor-

ton, Bertie Everard, and Herr von Oetzen, one of the *attachés* to the German Embassy. The rest of the party were still in the forest, and Lord Finistoun had gone deer-stalking.

Lady Finistoun had alighted, and stood on the steps to welcome Mona, which she did very cordially, kissing her more than once, and presenting her to Mrs Menteith as her 'dear cousin.'

'So,' said Everard, advancing to shake hands with her, 'you have been assigned to Lisle's care *ou revient toujours*, eh?'

'Oh, my mission is to take care of myself,' returned Mona, smiling. 'I did not know you had arrived.'

'Came last night. Had I known that Uncle Sandy's lair was between this and Kirktoun, I should have paid you a visit *en route*. Well, Mona, and have you recovered the Fitzallan episode? The poor fellow has had a desperate affair since. We have had to buy off the lady! How is my uncle? Are you the acknowledged heiress of Craigdarroch?'

'Alas, no! There is a cousin in the way. You must assist me to poison him.'

'With pleasure. We will arrange the terms of the desperate deed after dinner.'

'Come, Mona, the dressing-bell will ring in a few minutes. You shall have a cup of tea in your room.'

The usual description of party was assembled to enjoy the pleasures of shooting, fishing, and deer-stalking in the forest, as it was called, of Strathairlie:—a few fine ladies masquerading by day in the simplest of tweed dresses and thickest of walking boots, and blazing out in the evening in fascinating toilettes, most ingeniously contrived to show off the best points of the wearers; a larger gathering of men, who were out all day, and extremely tired at night, the greater number of whom were exceedingly bored by the presence of women, and moodily contrasted the wedded present with the glorious free-bachelorhood of past shooting parties on the same ground.

Mona felt very grateful to Madame Debrisay for persuading her to have a black satin 'demi-toilette,' as she donned that garment. It was most becoming to the beautiful fairness of her neck and

arms, yet she viewed herself with a slight sigh, as she thought of the quivering, exultant joy with which she used to go down to dinner at Harrowby Chase, to read an admiring verdict in Lisle's eyes, and listen to the words of tenderness he used to find so many unsuspecting opportunities of whispering. Then, she never doubted his entire devotion; now, she could hardly believe that anyone would sacrifice much for her. At anyrate she enjoyed unruffled peace, and, as a looker-on, would see more of the game than she ever saw before. At two or three-and-twenty, however, philosophy is but skin-deep, and life can never be enjoyable to the young without a personal interest.

The dinner was pleasant—even noisy, as most of the men were young and inclined to discuss their adventures eagerly. Mona was taken in by an honest-looking naval captain, who made himself very agreeable; and Lisle fell to the lot of a frisky widow, with whom he flirted gaily. Everard and Miss Morton quarrelled audibly.

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The young heir was paraded, and his health drunk; and after dinner Lady Finistoun and her sister-in-law went up to look at him in his cot. Then Mona was reminded that she used to sing, and was sent to the piano, where she was surrounded by some of the gentlemen as soon as they came in from dinner. The *attaché* complimented her on her render- of a Folkslieder, and talked to her for a few moments in German.

Then Lisle, who had not been near her since they had arrived, came close behind her, and said, in a low tone,—

'May I ask you for Tosti's "Good-bye, Summer?" It is the last song I heard you sing.'

'Was it?' said Mona. (How well she remembered that last happy evening at the Chase!) 'I am afraid I can hardly manage it without the music, but I will try.'

She succeeded in singing it sweetly and correctly, but she might have put more expression it.

'Thank you,' said Lisle shortly.

'I don't think you sing as well as you

did. You used to give that in a much more melting style formerly!' cried Everard.

'Sorry I have deteriorated,' said Mona, good-humouredly, as she took up her gloves, and left the piano.

The German *attaché* sat down uninvited, and after rattling off a brilliant *morçeau*, glided into an inspiriting waltz.

After tapping her foot for a minute or two, Miss Morton boldly invited one of the younger men, a boyish Northumbrian squire, to dance with her, and they were soon gyrating in the hall, the floor of which was polished oak, the open door permitting the music to be distinctly heard. Lady Finistoun followed with her brother-in-law, and Lisle, who had been talking with his host, ceased to speak, after listening for a few minutes, and crossing to the doorway where Mona was standing, said,—

'Shall we follow this wild example? I have scarcely danced since we waltzed together at the Chase. Will you trust yourself with me?'

'Yes,' returned Mona, in a low voice.

Something in its tone made Lisle look attentively at her; he saw, to his great

surprise, that her large, dark liquid eyes were full of tears. What had affected her? He could not remember having heard the waltz before; was it associated with any special memory in Mona's mind, or with that possible 'he' who may have filled the place he had voluntarily vacated? At anyrate he was conscious of a great longing to kiss away the tears,—to hold her in his arms,—to make her confess she had loved him once,—to promise that she would love him again. She was not refrigerated and indifferent, she was as delightfully tender as ever. How charming a soft womanly woman was—a gentle impressionable woman!

No doubt, so long as the softness and impressionability does not bore my lord her master, or worry him with tears and woes when his own tenderness flows away from her into new channels.

So Lisle put his arm round her, holding her to him more closely than was absolutely necessary, and they swung round in time to the music. Mona, however, soon declared that it was so long since she had danced, that she felt tired and

giddy almost immediately, and disengaging herself from her partner, sat down beside Mrs Menteith, a plain, pleasant-mannered woman, with a degree of military decision in her tone. She had married a light dragoon of moderate means, and had never regretted it.

Lisle stood by her for some time watching for an opportunity to talk to her unheard by others, but none offered.

In truth, the waltz was one that brought back to Mona painfully sweet and sad memories. It was associated in her mind with a certain evening when it had first dawned upon her that Lisle, of whom she stood a little in awe, sought her with a lover's warmth and tenderness. From that moment all the romance of her nature clung round not *him*, but the golden image of him which her fancy had set up! He was still, exteriorly, her idea, and she could have wept over the destruction of her lovely dream. Beyond this, the music recalled her kind tyrannical grannie, the sad scenes which preceded her death, above all, Leslie Waring, and all the pain she had inflicted on him. His face came

back to her as it looked when they parted —the boyish, plump, good-humoured countenance, made manly and dignified by suffering gallantly borne; and he had no mother or sister to comfort or support him! Like most warm-hearted girls, Mona had a great idea that every woman should be 'Our Lady of Consolation' to her kinsfolk and acquaintance.

It was the thought of Waring more than anything else that brought the tears to her eyes. How little Lisle could have followed the interweaving of her thoughts. Yet she knew he had felt to a certain degree with her from the instant he had put his arm round her. Yet it was with a kind of tender regret that she felt she could never trust him again. To Mona the absence of trust implied the death of love.

'If you can spare Sir St John!' cried Miss Morton, suddenly standing before her, 'I have suffered enough at the hands *and* feet of an incompetent partner, and I want a few really good turns before that delightful waltz stops.'

'My dear Miss Morton, it is nearly four years since I bounded on the light

fantastic toe,' said Lisle coolly, 'and I am not, Miss Craig will tell you, equal to conduct you through the mazy dance. I am going to have a cigar in the garden,' and he strolled away.

'I really think Captain—I mean Sir St John Lisle, can be frightfully rude! He was always one of the most conceited and heartless of men! You remember that affair of Lady Marchmont; he really threw her over scandalously!'

'I think Lady Marchmont was quite capable of taking care of herself. Lisle is just an ordinary man of the world—a little above the average in intelligence,' said Mrs Menteith.

'Well, I would not have any young person put much trust in him,' returned Miss Morton significantly. 'You ought to have brought over that handsome cousin of yours, Miss Craig. He might have taught us some reel steps. I want very much to learn the Highland Fling.'

'I never saw Kenneth dance,' said Mona.

'Kenneth! What a charming name. He has the most superb figure in the

Highland costume you can imagine, Mrs Menteith. A young Roderick Dhu. I really have quite *a schwarmerei* for him. Are you not in love with him, my dear Miss Craig? Living in the same house day after day, I don't see how it is to be avoided.'

Mona laughed, and said Kenneth was very handsome. Then Miss Morton declared her intention of going over to Craigdarroch for the express purpose of improving her acquaintance with the 'braw John Hielandman.'

Later, and shortly before the party broke up for the night, Lisle strolled up to where Mona was standing with Lord Finistoun, who moved away to ask his wife some question about to-morrow.

'There is such a splendid moon,' he said; 'I think you would be delighted with the effect of the silvery light streaming o'er moor and mountain. A walk down to the river would be charming.'

'I wish I could go!' exclaimed Mona frankly.

'Do come!' he cried. 'You would not be missed for half-an-hour.'

'No, no! I shall,' as my uncle says, 'gang awa' to my bed, and have a peep at the beauty you describe from my window.'

'It is a moon worthy of the warmest lovers!' exclaimed Lisle, in a tone of regret.

'Is the moon worthy of warm lovers?' said Mona, glancing at him with an arch smile; 'because it is, as astronomers tell us, a region of extinct volcanoes—of exhausted fires.'

Lisle looked at her sharply, and his brows contracted.

'What matter,' he said, 'if they were heavenly while they lasted.'

'Ah! fire does not belong to heaven—rather to the other place. Good-night.'

'Mona!' he exclaimed, in a low tone.

'Good-night,' she repeated. 'Good-night, Sir St John Lisle.'

CHAPTER III.

DIVERS OPINIONS.

ALTHOUGH Mona yielded to Lady Finistoun's earnest request, and remained over the following day, she was really anxious to return home. This passing contact with the social strata from which she had been divorced, showed her how deep was the gulf that yawned between her present and her past. She could not return to Lady Finistoun's set, neither would they that belonged to it pass from thence; she had thrown in her lot with Uncle Sandy, and with Uncle Sandy she must abide.

Mona had not the faintest tinge of snobbishness, but she was really fond of

Lady Finistoun, and the easy, pleasant manners, the tact, and tone of enjoyment of those who surrounded her, made a delightful whole, on which she was reluctant to turn her back. She was, however, philosophic enough to do so with a good grace, accepting the inevitable without a murmur.

During the day and evening which succeeded that last recorded, Lisle had no chance of speaking to Mona except before witnesses—and he grew very ill-tempered as time went on. Most of the ladies went out to lunch with the sportsmen at a distant point, but Mona remained with Mrs Menteith, and took a ramble with her, the heir, and his nurse, in the lazy, sunny afternoon.

At dinner Miss Morton cleverly captured Lisle, whose face, under the infliction, was a source of amusement to Mona whenever she looked at him. There was no attempt at dancing—the German *attaché* sang some duets with Mona, and Miss Morton, who had a shrill, clear voice—trained to perform extraordinary gymnastics—treated the com-

pany to some French comic songs—a performance which so disgusted Lisle, that, with an expressive glance at Mona, he disappeared and was seen no more.

The next morning was grey and soft, and Lisle, with Lord Finistoun, started early to stalk dear. Lisle was in a very bad temper. He was enraged at the smiling ease with which Mona kept him at bay, and mortified at being held in check by the fair woman who so comparatively short a time before had changed colour when he spoke to her—whose hand trembled when he took it in his own. Moreover, he was furious with himself for having lost the reins of his self-control, and fallen so much deeper in love than he had been. After all, he would get over it again—only he must not see her, or he would not answer for himself.

Lady Finistoun expected more guests, and was unable to accompany Mona on her return home. Miss Morton offered to drive her back to Craigdarroch in the pony carriage, and some time after luncheon they started. Lady Finistoun parted

with Mona most effusively, and insisted on her giving a promise to come again; but while neither granting nor witholding it, Mona guessed that in the rush of new pleasures and new people she would probably be forgotten.

Various important nothings had delayed their setting out, and it was nearly tea-time when Miss Morton drew up the ponies at Mr Craig's door.

The old gentleman had evidently been asleep over a volume of 'Metapheesics,' which he frequently took up after dinner.

'Here I am, uncle, back again on your hands,' said Mona, going into the library.

'Aweel, I am glad to see your face!' said Uncle Sandy cheerfully, 'though you did outstay your leave. Eh, you are looking bonnie! You'll be finding it dull and hamely here after yon grand hoose, and a' the fine doings.'

'I am very glad to come home, I assure you.'

'That's right; it's kindly said.'

'Miss Morton is in the drawing-room, uncle—may I ask her to tea?'

'Ay, to be sure. Is Lady Finistoun no with you? She is a bonnie bird!'

Mona explained, and ended by ringing and ordering tea to be prepared forthwith.

'I'm glad to see you, mem,' said Uncle Sandy, shuffling into the drawing-room with the help of his stick, and holding out his hand to Miss Morton, who rose up tall, thin, and somewhat masculine-looking, to greet him. 'You'll stay and tak' a bite and a cup o' tea.' Here he tumbled into a chair. 'There has been a touch of east in the wind yesterday and to-day, and my back and limbs have been just aching fearfu'. You'll feel it far keener ower in Strathairlie—we are weel sheltered here.'

'Oh, it is a wretched climate everywhere,' returned Miss Morton, with decision. 'In another month I suppose all civilised people must quit these latitudes.'

'Ceevilised!' repeated Uncle Sandy, in a sharp key. 'Why, Scotland is the most *ceevilised* country upon earth!'

'Oh, indeed! I never heard that before,' said Miss Morton, removing her hat and resettling the feather.

'Then it is time you did! Whaur will ye find a people so well edicated, and so intelligent? Whaur will ye find so much thrift, so little crime, such a God-fearin', self-respectin' population—'

'So extensive a consumption of whisky, and so large an *illegitimate* birth-rate!' interrupted Miss Morton, with strong emphasis.

Uncle Sandy gasped. That a woman—a young woman, or a woman who posed as young—a spinster, a fine lady, should have unhesitatingly uttered such a word—absolutely stunned him.

'Aweel, aweel, that's easy said. "Gie a dog a bad name." A' that is no proven,' he returned feebly; for he knew little of statistics, nor was he much given to believe what he did not like.

'I don't know if you ever read the graver magazines,' said Miss Morton, with an intolerable air of superiority, 'so perhaps you have not seen Professor Macgrubber's paper on the comparative morality of the Celtic races. He brings out some curious facts.'

'Facts!' angrily. 'Are ye sure they

are facts? I would nae be so keen to believe what a mon says against his ain country—(I suppose by his name he's Scotch?)—"it's an ill bird that fouls its ain nest."'

'Oh! he is a perfectly reliable scientific man, and he says the illegitimate—'

'It's no becoming to argue such a like subject wi' a young leddy,' interrupted Uncle Sandy, hastily and severely. 'At ony rate, we are ceevilised enough to ken that.'

'Oh, dear me!' exclaimed Miss Morton, with some contempt. 'It is evident you are more moral in talk than in action!'

Before Mr Craig could gather his forces to reply, Mona came to the rescue.

'I am sure tea must be ready. Shall we go into the dining-room? I am quite longing for a cup.'

'So am I. It is past my usual tea-time,' cried Miss Morton. 'What a lovely view you have here. I have rarely seen anything more beautiful, and I have knocked about a good deal.'

'I am surprised ye find any good in the country at a',' remarked Uncle Sandy,

with withering sarcasm, as he took his seat.

'The country, the rocks and mountains, and burns and sea, are well enough. In short, all save the spirit of man *and* the climate are divine,' remarked Miss Morton, with cheerful disregard of what anyone else thought.

This was so very evident, that Uncle Sandy instinctively felt he had better leave her alone.

'Mona and me—we have wandered a bit oursel's,' he resumed, to change the subject. 'It's varra divertin' to see the differences betwixt diverse nations.'

'It used to be,' corrected Miss Morton; 'but they are all growing horribly alike. When I was last at Jerusalem,' she continued, helping herself to a cream scone, while Uncle Sandy's eyes looked big with amazement, as seen over a huge cup of tea he had just lifted to his lips,—'when I was last at Jerusalem, a very enterprising German was just going to start a threepenny 'bus, from the Temple to Tophet—convenient, but vulgar.'

It is much to the credit of Uncle Sandy's

national caution and self-control that he swallowed his tea in silence, and even helped himself to a spoonful of marmalade, before he replied dryly in the interrogative form,—

'And how many times might you have been in the Holy City?'

'Twice. First when I joined Lord and Lady Huntover's party, and I was awfully bored. That determined me to travel on my own hook ever after; and then the year before last, when I went down the Danube and by the Black Sea to Constantinople, and so on by Smyrna and Damascus to Jerusalem. I only took my maid, and a dragoman from Smyrna. I enjoyed *that* tour. I met some very good-looking American naval officers; they were shrewd and amusing. *Apropos*, where is your nephew, Mr Craig?'

'He is awa' to the loch wi' Mary Black to fish. He never does much, though, wi' the rod. Hielanders have no patience—they want to be aye bang banging at birds. I doubt but Kenneth will have taken the nets. They will be here soon. The girlie canna want her tea.'

'I like to hear you talk, Mr Craig,' said Miss Morton, sending in her cup for replenishing. 'I fancy your Scotch is pure and unadulterated.'

'My English, you mean,' he said angrily. 'It is weel known that the Scotch speak better and more grammatical English than the English themselves.'

'I am learning a good deal to-day,' said Miss Morton coolly.

Mona hastened to turn the subject.

'I have always had a great wish to see Damascus,' she said. 'Is it very beautiful?'

'Yes, very lovely. The most picturesque place. It is completely encircled by hills. The site is something like—oh, like a frying-pan! The city, with its gardens and abundant trees, lies at the bottom, and a straight white road sloping up slightly looks like the handle, and leads to Beyrout.'

'Here comes your nephew, Mr Craig, and the young lady,' cried Miss Morton, interrupting herself—her seat was opposite one of the windows. 'There is another gentleman with them. I seem to know him. Why, it is Bertie Everard,

and he has a rod in his hand. I thought he had gone with the deer-stalkers. Now he will expect me to drive him back. What a bore.'

In a few moments Miss Black came in, blushing brightly from pleasure at seeing Mona, as well as from habitual shyness. She came straight to her, and kissed her with quiet cordiality. Kenneth, too, had no eyes for anyone but Mona, until he had greeted her.

Then Miss Morton called out,—

'How goes it, Mr Macalister; come here and sit by me. What a provoking creature you are to be out, when I have taken the trouble to drive over here.'

Kenneth coloured crimson, and explained to her and to his uncle that he was not fit to sit down to table, after dragging a net, until he had changed his clothes. Then he made his escape.

Everard went up to Mr Craig.

'Very glad to see you, sir,' he said, with unusual civility. 'I have been coming to call on you two or three times. Now I have made my way here at rather an unsuitable time, which I hope you'll excuse.'

'Sit ye doon, sit ye doon!' cried Uncle Sandy. 'All times are suitable—specially when food is ready. Bring mair cups and cookies. We are nae denuded, though the housewife has been awa'.'

For some occult reason, Everard was rather a favourite with Uncle Sandy.

'I thought you had gone with the deer-stalkers,' said Mona.

'I intended going, but Lisle was in such a beastly bad temper I thought I wouldn't venture. We would have been sure to quarrel. This place looks uncommonly well,—ever so much better than when Fitzallan had it. That's partly your doing, eh, Mona? Thank you,' as she handed him his tea. 'I must say women can be of use in making the inside of a house bearable, if in nothing else.'

'I believe men would do it better if they put their minds to it,' said Miss Morton.

'You ought not to say so, even if you think it,' returned Everard. 'It isn't good form for a woman to run down women.'

'But I don't run them down!' cried

Miss Morton. Then interrupting herself, as Mary was about to take the seat beside her—'No, no! this is Mr Macalister's place.'

Poor Mary fled to Mona's side of the table.

'Come by me, my dearie,' said Uncle Sandy, 'hurstling' nearer the end of the table to make room for her.

'Why, you never do anything else,' Everard continued, speaking to Miss Morton. 'You bully all the women up at the Lodge to no end.'

'Why do they let me, then? They are so weak, I cannot help it.'

'The Apostle says,—' began Uncle Sandy with some solemnity, intending to convey a dignified rebuke, and to say a word in season.

'Which Apostle?' asked Everard quickly. 'The Apostle Paul was a man of the world. He might have an idea or two on the extremely complicated question of female character, but the rest are nowhere on such a subject.'

Uncle Sandy retreated in tolerable order on the scones, but made no further sallies.

'You are really the most contradictory

creature I ever met, Bertie!' exclaimed Miss Morton. 'You are always railing at women yourself, but if I say a word against them, you are up in arms.'

'In arms! Whose arms? Yours? I am afraid you would give me more of a bear's hug than a loving squeeze.'

'Well!' cried Kenneth, hastily swallowing a lump of shortbread, and reddening vehemently with the effort, as also at the sound of his own voice, 'I say that no man is good for much who thinks the world would be worth living in were it not for the ladies.'

'Bravo, Kenneth!' said Mona, while Mary clapped her hands, and Uncle Sandy again essayed to express his views.

'The mon wha has na a kindly thocht for the mither that watched ower him an'—'

'Oh! mothers don't count in Mr Everard's world,' interrupted Miss Morton. 'He is so devoid of human feeling, that he must have been hatched by some patent incubator, like the funny little fluffy chickens one sees in that window in Regent Street.'

'Thank you,' said Everard. 'I am largely in your debt.'

'And so you believe in women,' said Miss Morton, turning to Kenneth, who had returned, clothed in his very best kilt and plaid. 'What a nice boy you are! If you are going to live here all your life, it is as well to have something to comfort you.'

'I have a great deal to comfort me.'

'That's fortunate! Now, as you know the country, I want you to take me to some good places for making sketches—picturesque nooks, you know, not wide expanses of country.'

'Oh! I am afraid I'm no great judge,' etc., etc.

While Miss Morton was exercising her blandishments on Kenneth, Everard was making himself agreeable to Uncle Sandy. He had a business faculty, which told upon his conversation with a kindred spirit, and the keen old Scotchman was interested in his remarks.

'Those fields of yours, between this and the loch, look considerably better and cleaner than they did last year; and I see

you have a capital lot of cattle on the pasture.'

'Ay,' said Uncle Sandy, much gratified. 'You see, the last twa years I was awa' seeking health and finding nane. Noo things go better under the maister's een, forbye Kenneth's, and he is a clever chiel aboot cattle and the like.'

'But, uncle, I am sure you are better than when I first saw you,' said Mona.

'Oh, ay! I do not say that I am no better, but it is varra little. The waters in yon place did me good—I don't deny it; but I am only a puir body after all.'

'When are you going to let Mona come back to us?' asked Everard.

'Oo! when she likes, when she likes!'

'I am not going from home again, thank you,' said Mona. 'I am conceited enough to think that I am of more use here than anywhere else.'

'And so you are, my lassie, so you are.'

'Why we will all be inconsolable, and Lisle will be tearing his hair! Come, Miss Morton, if you have done deluding that son of the mountains, it is time to drive me back to the Lodge.'

'Why, are you not going to walk?'

'Not if I can help it.'

'Then I suppose we must go,' to Kenneth. 'You will be sure to tell me what day it will suit you to guide me to this cleugh at Balmuir. Good-evening, Mr Craig, I wish you would let your cook teach Lady Finistoun's how to make those cream scones. If I can find that article of Macgrubber's, I'll send it to you. It will enlighten you a good deal.'

'You need not fash yourself,' stiffly. 'It's a kind o' enlightenment I dinna want.'

'That is sinning against light, Mr Craig. Good-evening.'

'You are really managing the old miser very well, Mona,' said Everard, in a low tone, as Mona went to the door to see her guests start. 'You are gathering sense. I always thought you less of a fool than most women.'

Mona thanked him demurely.

Kenneth was very attentive in arranging Miss Morton's wraps, and she was flatteringly coquettish. Mary could hardly

hide her laughter; then Everard jumped in, and they were off.'

'That's a varra remarkable woman,' said Uncle Sandy, when they all reassembled in the library, where a wood fire was crackling. 'But I canna say that she seems to me a wiselike ane. There's just naething she will na put her tongue to; neither is there onything that is respeckit by her. She is aye interrupting an' moidering aulder and wiser folk than hersel'. She has wandered to and fro, and seen a walth of places; but it has no improved her intelligence, for, when a's said an' dune, she is just a haverin' taupy!'

'Eh, Mr Craig, but you are cruel to speak so of a leddy that Kenneth is so pleased with, and who is so taken up with him,' said Mary, with a pretty, saucy smile.

'I wish to hear nae mair aboot her,' said Uncle Sandy, drawing an arm-chair near the fire, and tumbling into it, while his stick, catching under the fire-irons, upheaved them with a huge clang. 'If you stay here, just bide still, for I want a little sleep to mak up for what that stormy

woman broke in upon, and if ye canna, just gang in the other room.'

The young people readily took the hint, and in the drawing-room held high council.

The topic under discussion was Mary's return home. She thought she had been away long enough. But Mona strongly urged her remaining.

'You are rapidly becoming a prime favourite with my uncle, and you must rivet your chains before we venture to broach the question of your marriage. Let me write to your mother, begging an extension of leave.'

This advice prevailed, Mary adding to her consent with a soft sigh,—

'I am just too happy here.'

. . . . . .

The fine weather which had prevailed for some weeks now broke up, and October presented itself in gloomy guise, with wild winds and driving rain, which permitted but little out-door exercise to the girls.

Nothing kept Kenneth at home. He came in to his meals, damp and glowing from the exhilarating struggle with wind

and weather, and beaming with the hope and happiness which grew more and more as he perceived his beloved Mary was creeping into his uncle's heart.

Uncle Sandy himself was a little complaining and cranky; but, on the whole, music and reading, the state of the stocks, and book-keeping, with Kenneth's help, kept them tolerably amused during this period of imprisonment.

Lisle made no sign. Mona was not sorry. His presence, without having a distinctly disturbing effect, awoke painful memories, and obliged her constantly to think before she spoke.

At length a fairly bright morning broke upon the deluged country, and Mona undertoook to drive into Kirktoun to execute divers commissions.

Uncle Sandy objecting to be left alone, Mona departed with only 'the boy' in attendance.

Having finished her business, she turned the horse's head homewards, and had alighted to walk up the steep road which led from the loch to Craigdarroch, when a sportsman, with dog and gun, suddenly

emerged from a small wood which filled a sheltered hollow, and approached her. She recognised Lisle, and paused to speak to him.

'It is more than a fortnight since I saw you!' he exclaimed, in an aggrieved tone, while his keen light eyes sparkled with the joy of seeing her, and his hard mouth relaxed into a pleasant smile.

'I suppose it is,' returned Mona, smiling.

'It is a delightful day for walking. Will you not tell your servant to take the trap home, and let me have the pleasure of escorting you by the short way to the house? I have a message for you from Lady Finistoun, and was on my way to deliver it.'

Mona thought for a moment, and then said,—'I will.'

Directing the boy to go on, she walked on beside Lisle, and they turned off almost immediately by a path to the left, that led by a steeper and more direct line to the house.

'And what was Lady Finistoun's message?' she asked, as Lisle did not break silence immediately.

'Oh! she finds the extreme damp prejudicial to the darling baby, so she suddenly determined to start for their own place in Cumberland. Most of the party went with her. Finistoun and Everard remain for ten days or so longer. Lady Finistoun begged me to say how deeply she regretted not seeing you again, and that she would write as soon as she had reached Melton Court.'

'When did she leave?'

'Yesterday morning. They drove as far as Loanhead, and took the train to Perth there.'

'I am so sorry I did not see Evelyn again. I am really very fond of her.'

'Oh! you will no doubt meet in the winter. I suppose you will escape from these solitudes sometimes.'

'I do not think it likely I shall.'

'You are not bound here for the term of your natural life!' cried Lisle, drawing closer to her, and looking eagerly into her eyes. 'That unspeakable bore, Miss Morton, mentioned some absurd report of your uncle intending to marry you to his wild

Highlander of a nephew. It cannot be true!'

'Why?' asked Mona demurely.

'Why? A creature like *that?*'

'He is very good-looking, and most amiable in disposition!'

'But one knows how an amiable disposition may fare at your hands,' he returned, somewhat bitterly. 'Tell me, for God's sake, is it possible you can contemplate such a sacrifice? Do you really think of linking yourself with a mere respectable farmer?'

'Pray remember, if you please, that Kenneth Macalister is my near kinsman; he cannot be socially beneath me.'

'I daresay you think me an ill-bred brute, but you know how profoundly interested I have always been in you, and once in a crisis in your fate, you permitted me to advise you—'

'I do not think you waited for permission!' said Mona, with an arch smile.

'I think I never made such a mistake in my life! I am always burning to implore your forgiveness for my idiotic suggestion.'

'What is there to forgive?' she returned gently. 'On the contrary, I ought to be grateful to you for breaking through the principle of non-intervention, which, of course, would have prevented a man of the world doing anything so Quixotic as to offer a way of escape to a damsel in distress.'

'May I tell you what my own state of mind was at that unhappy juncture?'

'No, no! There is no use in looking back! Let us thank Heaven for the present.'

'I do not,' said Lisle gloomily. 'But do not be enigmatic. You are not going to marry this—this cousin of yours?'

'No, Sir St John!' returned Mona, assuming an air of sadness. 'I cannot, seeing that he has rejected me.'

'What!' cried Lisle; 'rejected you?'

'Yes! I hope you sympathise with me in the shock I have received? But Kenneth prefers *not* to marry me.'

'Then old Craig wanted to arrange a marriage?'

'He did; but his purpose has been

frustrated!' returned Mona, with tragic emphasis.

Lisle laughed.

'I understand, I think,' he said. 'Imagine any man refusing *you!* I did not think you had so much quiet sarcasm?'

'I am unaware of it,' returned Mona.

'And you will not listen to my explanation?'

'I do not see what you have to explain! and, were any explanation necessary, there is no time; we are close to the house, and I suppose you will come in and see Uncle Sandy?'

'Most certainly. But, Miss Craig, I must insist—I mean, I must implore you to hear the explanation I wish to make.'

'I really want none!—perhaps I understand more than you think.'

'I fear you may understand in a wrong way.'

'Well, here we are at the house, and here comes Uncle Sandy and Mary. If, in a paroxysm of hospitality, my uncle asks you to supper, do not stay. I know the *menu*, and you would not like it.'

Then hastening to meet them, she exclaimed,—

'I have brought you each a letter, but there is none for me from Madame Debrisay. I fear something must be the matter with her.'

CHAPTER IV.

THE BIRD IS FLOWN.

ISLE had never before been so piqued and frustrated as he was by Mona's mode of receiving his advances.

Had she shown coldness or resentment, he could have understood his position. But her sweet friendliness was utterly baffling.

His impatience, the eager fire that quickened his pulses, urged him perpetually to seek her; while pride, and his habitual reluctance to commit himself, held him back.

It was a running fight between these two forces, through the couple of weeks which succeeded Mona's visit to Strath-

airlie; but the strongest finally prevailed, and telling himself he really ought to let that old boor at Craigdarroch know that the right of fishing question was settled, he started in wonderfully good spirits for his morning's sport, intending to end the day in Mona's society. It was an especial stroke of luck, he thought, to have a *tête-à-tête* walk with her; but when he reviewed their conversation in the evening, while his friend and partner slumbered, he was obliged to confess that he had made very little way.

Did she—or did she not resent his throwing her over, as he undoubtedly had, when her grandmother came to grief?

She was so young and inexperienced at the time that she could hardly realise the impossibility of a man like himself risking marriage, even with a richly-dowered girl — a more enlightened, a more mature woman, would have seen and understood the difficulty, nor loved him the less for being ready to give her up to a richer rival. Women are awfully selfish and unreasonable! Now that

Mona had seen more of life—the seamy side of it too—she ought to appreciate the motives which actuated him; perhaps she did, for she never avoided him, or said sharp things, only she was so infernally calm and frank! It was quite possible she might have fallen in love with someone else in the interim. Who could it be?—some brute of a foreigner?

Lisle felt savagely jealous, as though his sacred rights had been infringed. He would do, or sacrifice anything to call the conscious colour to her cheek—to win a confession of love from her lips, even the sacrifice of himself to the fetters of matrimony. Now that he was rich—richer than people generally knew—it was possible to escape the worst ills of indissoluble union. Of course the connection was most objectionable, but nowadays that mattered little. Mona herself was always a social success. All society asked was to be soothed and amused. Who provides the soothing and amusement matters very little.

The old 'peasant proprietor,' her uncle, did not matter. Lisle was not the man

to allow anyone he objected to to cross him. And if Mona loved him (which, if he once surrendered, and asked her to marry him, she would, warmly, deliciously), she would yield to him in everything. The thing was really worth risking. Life with Mona would be very charming for a year or so. So Lisle reasoned, as he thought, coolly; but, in truth, the tide of passion was rapidly rising to that height which demands gratification at any price.

Having made up his mind more thoroughly than he was perhaps aware, Lisle found shooting, and even deer-stalking, a less satisfying amusement than it used to be, and two or three days after his chance encounter with Mona, he started for Craigdarroch, determined to begin the siege in earnest.

It was a crisp, clear afternoon, and seldom had 'his bosom's lord sat so lightly on its throne.' Of his success he never doubted. The only question that he debated mentally, was how soon it would be in good taste to declare himself. They were not strangers. She

must know that he had been a good deal smitten with her nearly four years ago. It was only taking up the dropped stitches in the web of their lives. He would be guided by circumstances.

'Is Mr Craig at home, and the young ladies?' he demanded of the little maid who came when he rang.

'The maister's in, but—' she was beginning, when Mr Craig himself appeared, with his inevitable stick, at the library door.

'Eh, come your ways!' he cried. 'I saw ye as ye walked up the drive. I'm glad to see you. I'm here alane: they're a' oot.'

'Indeed!' said Lisle, following him into the library, intending to give the old man a few minutes, to find out where Mona had gone, and to follow her. 'What has become of your nieces?'

'Mary Black is no niece of mine. She is a nice-like girlie, but I have no kin except Mona and Kenneth. Well, they are awa' to set Mona on her road.' (He called it 'rod.')

'On her road! Where?' asked Lisle.

'To Glasga'. She'll get there this evening, in time to catch the London night express.'

'London!' repeated Lisle, in angry surprise. 'Has she gone to London?'

'Yes. She had a letter frae Madame —maybe you'll mind Madame Debrisay, the leddy wha took my niece in when you grand folks turned her oot. Weel, the letter wasna frae hersel'. It was the landlady — an honest-like woman— wha wrote, at madame's order, to explain why *she* could not write. She was varra sick with bronchitis, and the landlady she added that she was frightened hersel', for she was that bad the doctor wanted her to have a nurse. With that, nothing would keep Mona; she must go to nurse her. I was angered against her, for I didna think it right for her to go off in a jiffy frae me, wha is as a father to her, and maintains her.'

'But she went?' ejaculated Lisle.

'Ay, she did that. She put her arms round my neck, and she says, wi' her bonnie een full o' tears,—"Don't seek to stop me, uncle. *She* was good to me

before I knew you; and don't you think," she says, "if *you* were ill, I'd come awa' frae everyone to nurse you?" an' I felt she spoke true—she would stick to me, so I just said,—"I'll no pay for your whim-whams," and she says, "No, uncle! I have money enough for the journey. Just let me go with your goodwill," an' I said,—"Go, then, my lassie," and she's gane.'

'Good heavens!' cried Lisle. 'Alone; to go through the worry and annoyance of changing—of—'

'What's to harm her? She is nae a bairn,' interrupted Uncle Sandy. 'We live in a ceevilised country.'

Lisle was silent with vexation. Had he but known, he might have escorted her to Glasgow, if not to London; and what a different journey it would have been from the last they had taken together. He was certainly out of luck.

'Still, I am surprised you did not send young Macalister with her!' exclaimed Lisle, when he had mastered his impulse to swear audibly and energetically at the self-satisfied, miserly old scarecrow that

had let his charming niece—the temporary idol and future wife of Sir St John Lisle — go off alone, to struggle with porters and passengers like a poor servant girl going to a new place.

'What for should Kenneth waste his time when I wanted him here, forbye the siller it would cost there and back? Young people have nae consideration—an' yet *you're* no a lad any longer, Sir St John!'

'The greenness of my youth has certainly departed. But I am greatly annoyed about this sudden journey. I have nothing on earth to do! If I had had an idea Miss Craig was going alone, I should certainly, with your permission, have escorted her to Glasgow, and seen her off to London.'

'Eh, ye needna fash yoursel' about *my* permission! Mona is varra headstrong in some ways. She does not bend hersel' to my wull as she ought—considering I am willing to provide for her; and she has crossed me in a matter I had set my mind on. Still, she's a guid an' a kind lassie. There's just one thing we canna agree on.'

'And what may that be?' asked Lisle, to keep the old man going, while he pondered what step he should take to recover his lost quarry.

'She is just awfu' set against my neyfew Kenneth—a guid laddie, and a braw young mon—and I should like to see my bit land an' gowd go to baith, but she's aye resolved not.'

'But, my dear sir, you do not suppose that a girl like Mona—I mean your niece—could marry a mere young'—plough-man, he was going to say, but he changed it to the word 'countryman. It would be too incongruous.'

'He is no that countrified! He was for twa years in the city of London in an office.'

'Oh, of course; that makes a vast difference,' said Lisle gravely. 'Where does this Madame Debrisay live?'

'In a varra nice part—Westbourne Villas, nigh the Royal Oak station. You'll ken it, I'm thinking.'

'I cannot say I do,' returned Lisle, while he thought, 'Old blockhead! Why did he not give me the number?'

'There are varra fine hooses aboot there, and plenty omnibuses to a' pairts.'

'Very convenient, I'm sure! What is this Madame Debrisay's number? Lady Finistoun will want to know Miss Craig's address.'

'Eh! but she knows it weel. She has been there hersel'.'

'Obstinate old idiot!' thought Lisle; 'he will not tell. Oh, indeed!' he said aloud. 'You must miss your niece very much.'

'I will do so! Sma' doot o't. She is a remarkable, wise-like, douce lassie—only a wee self-opeenionated! It's amazing that, being so lang among a lot o' fule-folk, she kept her senses so weel.'

By this time Lisle had gathered himself together, and said,—

'I ought to apologise for speaking so warmly, but I always take a lively interest in Miss Craig.'

'Sae it would seem,' returned Uncle Sandy, with a chuckle, which struck Lisle as peculiar.

Did the old duffer presume to form any surmises as to the source of that interest?

Lisle thought he had talked to him quite long enough.

'I brought you the last communication from the factor of Balmuir,' he said. 'You see he has caved in, and you may consider the question settled.'

'Oh, that's weel, varra weel,' putting on his glasses.

'And I must say good-morning. Can I do anything for you at Kirktoun? I am going back there.'

'No, I thank ye. Kenneth will bring back a' that is wanted.'

'Good-bye then. I hope you will hear to-morrow of Miss Craig's safe arrival.'

Lisle strode away in an intense ill-humour. Mona was altogether inexplicable. At the shortest notice she was ready to put miles between herself and the man that she must know was ready to throw himself at her feet! And all to nurse a broken-down music-mistress. Yet there was something in her generous readiness to help a friend that appealed to his better nature. Whatever she was, she had a sound heart! True, this woman might have some hold over her! He re-

jected the low suspicion. After all, it would be well to have such a girl by his side to comfort and sustain him in the inevitable dark hours which come even to the wealthiest and most prosperous. Lisle would not have given much thought to this side of the question had not the character he was considering belonged to a young and charming woman who had for the moment escaped him. Still, to the most selfish come, in occasional glimpses, the perception of what is good and true. Craftiness, and cold, worldly wisdom are useful within certain limits, but once caught in the tangled brake of doubt, difficulty, sorrow, suffering, there love and truth are the only guides.

Some such ideas, considerably modified, were floating through Lisle's brain, when he heard the 'flop flop' of Mr Craig's heavy-footed steed, and soon the ramshackle phaeton and ridiculously disproportioned horse came round a bend of the road. In the vehicle were seated Miss Black, whose eyes looked suspiciously red, and Kenneth, who held the

reins. He pulled up as Lisle waved his hands.

'So, Miss Craig has deserted you!' he cried.

'She has indeed,' returned Kenneth. 'It is a bad business—poor Madame Debrisay being so ill. I never knew her to be ill before.'

'And I am sure Mona had a sad heart,' said Miss Black. 'She looked so pale and downcast. It will be a long, weary road for her to travel all alone.'

'She telegraphed first thing to say she was coming,' added Kenneth.

'What's her address?' asked Lisle. 'I must let Lady Finistoun know.'

'It's 9 Westbourne Villas—away near the Royal Oak,' said Kenneth.

'Thank you,' returned Lisle, making a mental note of it.

A few more words and they parted, going in opposite directions.

'Queer people,' mused Lisle, as he walked rapidly down hill. 'But I suppose they enjoy themselves as we do, and are probably less often bored. Anyhow, it must be a relief to get away

from such surroundings—my sweet Mona. I am a most unlucky dog to have missed the chance of a long journey with you. I might have had, with judicious management, the privilege of kissing away your tears, if you shed any, and generally comforting you. Shall I follow? I must think.'

. . . . . .

The shock was great to Mona when she read of her good friend's illness. Hitherto Madame Debrisay had been invariably well, and the idea of her being alone and helpless, in a mere lodging, was intolerable.

Mona immediately determined to go to her, and, as Uncle Sandy rightly surmised, nothing would have held her back; no fear of being disinherited would have prevented her, as Uncle Sandy said, from 'ganging her ain gate.'

Her quick imagination depicted matters as considerably worse than she ultimately found them, and her solitary journey south, through the long darkness of a mid-October night, was passed in brief snatches of sleep and prolonged fits of

thought. Reviewing her relations to Madame Debrisay and her uncle—the only two real friends she possessed—she felt how much nearer and dearer the former was. In her she had a friend, not only attached, nay, devoted, capable of understanding and sympathising with her to an unusual degree. To Uncle Sandy she felt bound, not by gratitude only, but by the almost indissoluble bond which holds a generous soul to the being who depends upon it. Having known her, he would be utterly desolate without her; but real companionship did not exist between them. Mona felt she could not spend her whole life with Uncle Sandy, neither could she desert him. She half hoped that Mary Black would in time fill her place. Respecting her own future, she neither hoped nor feared much. Her meeting with Lisle had saddened her a good deal. She felt the old charm of his style and manner, but her heart could never go out to him again. Neither could the highest worth, she thought, atone for the want of that indescribable

grace and refinement which only the force of habit and association from childhood can produce. Still life was rich enough to possess plenty of interest and enjoyment, besides the supreme delight of loving and being loved, by some man who could satisfy both mind and fancy; and, for the present, she only asked to be of use to dear Madame Debrisay.

It was a cold raw morning, thick and foggy, when she reached her destination. The landlady greeted her warmly; she was evidently glad to have the responsibility lifted off her shoulders.

'Madame has seemed better ever since she had your telegram yesterday; but, for all that, she has had a terrible night, such a fight she has for breath, poor dear. I sat up till past two with her, and then Lizzy took my place.'

'I will go and see her at once,' said Mona.

'Do have a cup of tea first, miss.'

'No thank you—after.'

Poor Madame Debrisay shed tears of joy at the sight of her dear child.

'And did your uncle agree to your coming?' she whispered.

'He was obliged,' returned Mona, smiling. 'Though he grumbled, he was quite good about it. I suppose he remembered how kindly you nursed him.'

'I would be *so* sorry if *I* was the cause of any bad feeling between you! But, oh! it is a joy and a comfort to have you near me, darling!'

Though quite inexperienced in nursing, Mona's common-sense and careful observance of the doctor's directions soon taught her, and the atmosphere of cheerfulness she created was infinitely beneficial to the sufferer. A few days saw a decided improvement. Soon Mona was released from the fatigue of regular night watching, and Madame Debrisay was able to take more nourishment; while the doctor announced that we were 'doing very well indeed.'

But Madame Debrisay was by no means without kind acquaintances. Her German friends made frequent inquiries and brought her flowers, and, soon after her arrival, Mona heard a man's voice in loud and peremptory tones asking many particulars respecting the invalid;

after which came a basket of grapes, with General Fielden's compliments.

'Now, isn't that nice!' exclaimed Madame Debrisay. 'That is my artillery-man whom I described to you. If you knew the sort of old tiger he is, you would be amazed at his thinking of grapes for a poor sick woman.'

'You evidently have power to soothe the savage breast,' said Mona, laughing.

'It's for the sake of old times he comes. He called to see me one Sunday, and sat nearly an hour talking of his old love, my cousin Rose Nugent. I showed him your photograph, and he was greatly taken with it. He thought it like Rose, and I did not contradict him; but you are about as much alike as a cluster of grapes and a peach.'

The day after, Mona had the pleasure of assisting her friend from her bed to an easy-chair by the fire, when the 'girl' put in her head to say, the gentleman was in the drawing-room, and would Miss Craig speak to him.

'I will come directly,' said Mona.

'Be sure you tell him how much I

enjoyed his grapes,' said madame. 'It was so good of him to send them. Just brush your hair over, dear. I want you to look nice.'

Mona laughed, and humoured her, tying a small scarf of ivory-coloured old lace round her throat, to smarten up her olive green cashmere morning wrapper.

'He will not stay long, I suppose, but I will tell Mrs Puddiford to give you your beef-tea.'

So saying, Mona went into the front room, where a cheerful fire was burning, though otherwise it looked too accurately neat to have an inhabited air; and there on the hearthrug stood Lisle.

The sudden surprise brought a quick, bright blush to Mona's cheek, and she stood still an instant, the long, straight folds of her morning-gown sweeping from her graceful shoulders to the ground, giving her additional height and dignity.

'I hope I am not taking a liberty in calling so early?' said Lisle, coming forward to clasp the hand she held out, with the exclamation,—

'I had no idea it was you! I fancied you were still in Scotland!'

'Pray, who *did* you expect then?' asked Lisle sharply, as he still held her hand, and looked with eager inquiry into her eyes.

'General Fielden—a friend of Madame Debrisay's,' withdrawing her hand from his clasp. 'Have you any message from my uncle? Is all well at Craigdarroch?'

'I do not think Mr Craig knew that I was coming to London,' he returned. 'It was rather a sudden idea of mine. Are you not going to ask me to sit down?'

'Oh, yes! of course! Pray, sit down, Sir St John. I am so startled at seeing you, that I forget my manners,' she said, laughing. 'How did you know where I was?'

'Well, you see, I speak the language, and I asked your kilted kinsman. You do not suppose I was going to lose sight of you?'

Something in his tone—his eyes—made Mona uneasy. She did not want to come to any explanation with him. She did not want to quarrel with him. Yet she told

herself that he could not have been so eccentric as to have fallen in love with her over again. Had he really cared for her, he would never have tried to hand her over to another.

'I have been too busy, and too anxious about my friend Madame Debrisay, to think of anything else,' said Mona coldly, as she drew a low chair to the fire; and Lisle seated himself at the table.

'Yes! I understand, you have been doing the Sister of Mercy business; and you look like it. Those bewildering eyes of yours look weary, and your cheek is pale. You want air and light. Can you not get off duty for an hour or two, and drive with me to Harrow or Richmond? It is a fine, brisk day, and it would be heavenly to have you all to myself for even a short spell.'

'You are very good, Sir St John,' returned Mona calmly, 'but it is impossible I could leave my patient yet.'

'Later, then, I may be able to persuade you.'

'You will not stay long in town at this unseasonable season,' she said. 'And I

do not know when Madame Debrisay will be well enough to spare me.'

'Oh, I shall be in town some time yet. You should not have left your uncle's side all unguarded, Miss Craig. Your friend Miss Black seems a very insinuating young person, and it strikes me that Mr Kenneth Macalister is considerably attracted to her bonnie blue een.'

'Why do you think so?'

'Don't you know that a sort of electric atmosphere encompasses a man and woman who are in love, which reveals itself in lightning flashes of intelligence. No man who has loved, and still loves, can breathe it without comprehending much that is unspoken.'

'This is quite a new idea to me.'

'No doubt it is! You are too cold to feel these subtle influences. You used not to be so cold, Mona—I mean Miss Craig! You used to vibrate exquisitely to the touch of feeling or—'

'I have no doubt I was a silly, impressionable girl, like most *débutantes*.'

'No! there were not many *débutantes*

like you, at least in my estimation, as no doubt you know.'

'As to Kenneth and Miss Black,' said Mona, turning a deaf ear to this compliment, 'I think they are attached to each other, and it is my favourite scheme that they should marry, and comfort the last days of my uncle.'

'Not a bad idea, only they would cut you out!'

'Oh! I should take my chance of that! —at least it would give me freedom.'

'Freedom! Ah! And what would you do with it?'

'A tremendous question! When the time came you should see.'

'Mona—' began Lisle, in a tone the appealing tenderness of which made Mona's heart beat vehemently; when Mrs Puddiford, short and puffy, in her morning print dress and apron, opened the door and asked,—

'Would you see General Fielden, miss? He says he will not keep you many minutes.'

'Pray show him in,' said Mona, with alacrity.

Whereupon the warlike-looking veteran described by Madame Debrisay entered, erect and austere in aspect, and making a fine old-fashioned bow to the young lady, said in quick, staccato style,—

'Miss Craig, I presume?'

Mona rose and bent her head, smiling graciously as she did so.

'Took the liberty of asking to see you. Thought you would let me know how Madame Debrisay really is. It's always "Better, better, better" with servants, till they startle you with—"Please, sir, he (or she) died this morning!"'

'I am happy to say, my dear friend Madame Debrisay *is* much better,' said Mona, looking kindly into his eyes. 'She is sitting up for the first time this morning. In a few days I hope she will be able to see you. She greatly enjoyed the delightful grapes you sent her.'

'Did she? Glad of it! There's another basket out in the hall.'

A short pause ensued, which was broken by Lisle saying in his pleasantest, frankest manner,—

'I think I had the pleasure of meeting

General Fielden—at Harrowby Chase—some years ago, though probably you do not remember me.'

'I know your face, but I cannot fit it with a name,' returned the General, looking sharply at him.

'My name is Lisle. I was then captain in the —th Hussars, and I have been since on Sir Arthur Wriottesly's staff.'

'Ah, yes; I remember. You won the military steeplechase at Bundlepore last year. Waller, of your regiment, was telling me about it,' etc.; and the General seemed setting himself to enjoy a military and sporting gossip.

'They will stay all the afternoon,' thought Mona. 'I cannot stay here to listen.' 'As you seem to know each other,' she said, 'I will go and see if my patient wants anything.'

'Do,' returned General Fielden, shifting his position to a larger and more comfortable chair, as if he did not intend to move for some time. 'I will stay till you come back. I have a message for Madame Debrisay. Why the

deuce she calls herself madame I can't think.'

'I am sorry I have an engagement,' said Lisle, rising, his mouth curling with an expression of extreme annoyance, 'and I must say good-morning. I suppose, Miss Craig, I am likely to find you at home any day? You really look very pale and tired. You must let me persuade you to take some exercise.'

'Thank you! Madame Debrisay will soon be able to leave her room, and then I may go out. Good-bye, Captain Lisle.'

The gentlemen exchanged bows, and Lisle departed.

'Never mind me,' said the General. 'I've nothing to do. I can wait.'

'You seem to have been entertaining a few people,' said madame, with something of the old sparkle in her bright black eyes, as Mona came to her side.

'I have been entertaining your General, and—shall I say—my captain?'

'It was Lisle, then?' whispered Madame Debrisay eagerly. 'I mean Sir St John Lisle.'

'Yes! I never was more surprised than when I found him waiting in the next room. I thought he was not coming south before November.'

'My dear Mona! mark my words—'

'Do not waste any, dear Deb,' she interrupted quickly, 'because I know the special chord of wisdom on which you are going to harp. Say nothing about Captain Lisle at present. General Fielden has brought you more grapes. He seems quite concerned about you.'

'Now, isn't he good, poor old fellow? To think what a fine, handsome soldier he was, and now he is all bones and eyebrows.'

'He is soldierly-looking still. I have rather taken a fancy to him. Still I do not want him to stay all day. I want to write a long letter to Uncle Sandy. I will make up your fire, dear, before I go back; and let me settle the pillow under your head.'

'And is Sir St John gone?'

'Yes!'

'And when is he coming again?'

'Oh, I don't know! Very probably never!'

'Ah, Mona!' But Mona was gone.

'Madame Debrisay begs me to say how much she feels your kind thought for her,' said Mona, smiling brightly and sweetly on the grim old warrior, who had taken up a fortnightly which lay on the table, and fixed his glasses on his nose.

'Ha!'—dropping his spectacles—'that's all right. Is she really better? I daresay your being here helps her on a good bit. It's a pity you are not her daughter.

'I can act the part of one.'

'I daresay you can, and do; but it's not the same. There is neither the right nor the duty. Men and women of my age and hers are the better of sons and daughters, even though they give trouble! She has known you a long time.'

'Ever since I was a girl of twelve, though I did not see very much of her till I came to live with my grandmother in London.'

'Who was your grandmother?'—abruptly.

'Mrs Joscelyn Newburgh.'

'Oh, you were *her* grand-daughter? 'Ah!'

He seemed lost in thought for a few moments, and then resumed,—

'I am going abroad in a week or two. I always go to Pau or the Riviera in the winter. Can't live in England. Now I should like to see Madame Debrisay before I go. I have a picture to show her. Will you write and tell me when I may call?'

'Certainly, General Fielden. She will be very pleased to see you when she is strong enough, but she really has been very ill.'

'I am sure of it; and I suspect her march through life has not been on velvet, though she looks wonderfully young and well. She comes of a handsome race;' and the old man sighed quickly. 'The doctor ought to make her keep indoors all the winter.'

'Oh, my dear sir, that is impossible! She must keep up her connection. She could not afford to lose her pupils.'

'Ay, that's it; that is a bad business,' returned the General thoughtfully. Then he asked some questions about Lisle, respecting whom he seemed rather curious.

and sat for a considerable time. Then he suddenly started up, and begged pardon for occupying her time. 'You see,' he added, 'I have nothing to do, and no one to care about. Mind you tell me when Madame Debrisay can see me, like a good girl.'

. . . . . .

Once out of bed, Madame Debrisay made rapid progress. She had an excellent and an untried constitution; nor had her attack, though severe, been of the worst kind.

Mona was able to give General Fielden notice that her friend and patient was strong enough to 'receive,' sooner than she had hoped. He came immediately, sat talking a long while, and seemed to enjoy a cup of tea. The picture he had to show was a much-faded photograph of pretty Rose Nugent, and the old acquaintances indulged in much retrospective conversation over it. This, and elaborate descriptions of his aches and pains, formed the staple of his discourse.

Lisle had called twice. The first time, Mona was about to assist Madame De-

brisay into the sitting-room, and she was obliged to explain and dismiss him; the second, she was really out.

The General evidently found himself comfortable and at home in the cosy sitting-room, while he imbibed his afternoon tea, and smiled grimly when Madame Debrisay, whose spirits were reviving, laughed at his complaints, and told him he would be nearly quite well if he would only believe it, and that she would back him against Lisle for a day's shooting, if he chose to try.

'It is all too pleasant to last,' sighed madame, one gusty, cheerless afternoon, as General Fielden asked Mona if the servant would whistle a cab for him, as it was time for him to go. 'I must soon get back to my work—*that* I do not mind; but Mona has been quite a month here, and I must let her go, and there's the shoe that pinches!'

'Go back to work!' cried the General. 'You will kill yourself.'

'Then it is a choice of deaths, *Monsieur le Général*,' she returned, laughing. 'But I am good for some years yet. If I could

only keep this girl with me, I should be ready to face anything.'

'And why won't she stay?'

'Oh, she belongs to her uncle, and I would not interfere with her, though I suspect she prefers her own "Deb."'

Mona laughed, and blew madame a kiss.

'Ay, that's just it. It's the want of a legal right that plays the deuce!' and hastily bidding the ladies good-bye, he departed.

When Lisle perseveringly called a third time, he was partially rewarded. The tea-table was spread, and the presence of General Fielden procured him a *tête-à-tête*, for the General, finding Madame Debrisay played chess, decided in his own mind that a little tranquil amusement of that kind was the very thing for her, had set out the pieces, and was delightfully engaged in capturing her bishops and checking her queen.

'I began to fear I should never see you again,' said Lisle, in a low voice, drawing near Mona, who sat at work by the fire. 'You are so heartless and cruel. You never give a fellow the least chance.'

'Chance of what?' asked Mona, threading her needle.

'Of speaking to you alone.'

'But I do not want to speak to *you* alone. I have nothing to say that the whole world might not hear.'

'How hideously cold and unkind you are, Mona. Well I have something to whisper in your ear alone, though, if you will listen favourably. I do not care how soon it may be proclaimed upon the house tops.'

He leant towards her, seeking to meet her eyes.

Mona's colour rose, and then faded quickly, while she looked steadily at her work.

'Then do *not* say it,' she replied softly.

'Do you mean what you say?'

'I do.'

CHAPTER V.

UNCLE SANDY FINDS AN OLD FRIEND.

BACK again at Craigdarroch, under the murky December clouds, back with the driving rain, and the wild wind weirdly sobbing among the solemn pine trees and leafless oaks.

Winter on the west coast, though less bitterly cold than in other parts of the country, is gloomy and threatening. There was something grand if oppressive in the stormy, threatening aspect of sky and sea seen through breaks in the swirls of grey mist driven hither and thither by fierce blasts from the broad Atlantic. Now and then the sun broke through cloud and vapour, and, dispersing the

fleecy wrack that tried to shut him out, shed almost summer brightness on the wintry scene; while in the lull of the storm, one might imagine that a day had been stolen from April and thrown to the tempest-tossed earth to comfort her amid the gloom and stress of winter weather.

It was a dreary time for Mona.

Mary Black had been recalled to her home. The smallness of the little group, isolated as it were on that rugged hill-side, and the feeling that it was a work of time, nay almost of danger, to escape to the comfort and companionship of a great city, created a sense of imprisonment exceedingly trying to the spirits.

Mona was quite ashamed of her own depression a little before Christmas. She felt as if she was forgotten by everyone. Lady Finnistoun had written a pressing invitation to visit her at her home in Cumberland, when Mona was with Madame Debrisay, which, under any circumstances, she would have refused, and since she had given no sign, neither had Lisle. And even Madame Debrisay had not written for a fortnight. Mona had suggested a

few weeks in Edinburgh to help them over the depth of the winter, but somehow Uncle Sandy did 'not see it!'

There was nothing for it but to endure the inevitable routine.

Breakfast at nine, and a consultation with the cook—for 'supplies' was a question of some difficulty; then a long spell of reading to her uncle; an escape to needle-work or music; dinner, after which Mr Craig slumbered for a couple of hours, and Mona was free, if the weather did not permit of going out; a walk to the farmyard or round the garden if it did; tea and the newspaper; more work or music on Mona's part, more sleep on Mr Craig's; a little talk with Kenneth, then supper and bed. Day after day alike. Mona did not think she could live through another winter.

At last the post brought excitement—surprise—an entirely new set of ideas—in a letter from Madame Debrisay.

'My Dearest Mona,—I suppose you think me one of the most worthless and ungrateful women in the world! Well,

just wait, and you will excuse me. My dear, imagine me writing behind a big fan to hide my blushes! About a week ago I had come in very tired from one of my first attempts to do my usual day's work, and was refreshing myself with a cup of tea, when in walked my General. I sent for another cup, and we sat down cosily together.

'"You are looking very ill," he said, so stacatto that he made me jump.

'"I daresay I am," said I. "It is fatiguing at first. In another week I shall be all the better for my work. It would do me small good to sit here alone."

'"That's true," he returned, as if he felt the truth in the bottom of his heart; "that's just what I think;" and we each drained a goblet—no, I mean a cup, so deep was our conviction! "Still," said he, as if out of his thoughts, "I don't like to see you killing yourself."

'"Indeed I do not want to do anything of the kind: life is still worth living for me."

'"That's because you have a good heart!" he cried, fortissimo.

'"Don't flatter," said I.

'"I do not — I never did," said he. "Now, I am rather lonely—so are you; suppose you come abroad with me and take care of me? It's not much of an offer to a handsome woman still in her prime," said he, very civilly.

'"My dear General," said I, "what would the world say?"

'"We'll gag the world, my dear Madame Debrisay, if you have no objection to go through a little ceremony!"

'"Good gracious, General!" I cried, "do you want to marry me?"

'"I do," said he, very stoutly. "I haven't much to offer you, but I can leave you enough for independence. We have both borne the burden of the day, so let us spend a peaceful evening together. I am a gruff sort of fellow, but not bad at heart; and I'll not growl more than I can help. Just turn it over in your mind, and I will come to-morrow for an answer. If you say yes, we might get things arranged, and start in ten days or so for Nice."

'Well, dear, I have said "Yes," and

I think I have done well. We are to be married at the registry office, as neither of us are at the romantic age when we might want to make a religious festival of it. Herr and Frau Nachtigall are to be my witnesses, and an ancient veteran, an old comrade of General Fielden's, is to be his. I think the dear old fellow is quite fond of me. He brings me presents every day; one time a pair of gloves lined with fur, then a watch (it belonged to his wife, I imagine, but it is good and pretty), then a warm cloak. He is strong in wraps, and is quite cheerful about being married. Well, Mona, I'll do my very best to make him happy and comfortable. He is a good soul and a real gentleman. He sends his love to you, and says he is quite ready and willing to adopt you at any time, so, dear, you have not lost me —you have kept me and gained another and a much more potent friend. Write and tell me what you think of all this. I shall long to see you, and Uncle Sandy must spare you to us when we come back to Paris in the spring. — Always your loving friend, G. DEBRISAY.'

Mona read this important communication with sincerest pleasure. She had taken a fancy to the gruff, good-hearted old soldier, and she thought it very probable that her dear Deb, with her courage and experience, would probably keep him up to a proper pitch of amiability, *but*, and she gave a little sigh, she doubted that she herself would gain as much as Madame Debrisay anticipated. 'She and the General will grow quite fond of each other and not want me. What a selfish idea! I ought to be ashamed of myself,' she thought. 'I will go and write a letter of congratulation, and I will send her poor grannie's cat's-eye and diamond bracelet for a wedding present: it is the prettiest thing I have. I wonder will my uncle think of giving her anything?' Here that gentleman's stick was heard tap, tapping as he approached after an expedition to the poultry-yard with Kenneth.

'Oh, Uncle Sandy!' she cried, as he came in and threw himself, in his usual style, into his particular chair, 'I have just had a letter from Madame Debrisay. She is going to be married.'

'Married! Aweel, there's nae fule like an auld fule! I'll be bound she's goin' to tak' some lad that might be her son!' he exclaimed, with severe contempt.

'You are wrong, uncle; she is going to marry General Fielding—who must be fifteen or twenty years older than she is—a nice old gentleman, who wants someone to take care of him and make his last days comfortable; so they think it wiser and more respectable to be married.'

'That sounds mair reasonable. Has the General ony siller? These soldier men scatter mair than they gather. It's just a misfortin' to the country to have the like o' them to support.'

'He is not rich,' returned Mona, leaving her uncle's abstract observation unanswered, 'but fairly well off—at least for all they will want. I am very, very glad of this news; for though dear Madame Debrisay has worked so hard, I do not think she has laid by anything, and the time will come when she can work no more.'

'That's true, Mona; but it's no every young lassie would think o't, an' it mak's

me think o' yoursel'. I'll not forget you, my dearie; and I'll no put it off ony mair. I'll go doon to Glasga, the week after next, and see Mr Cochran—that's my man o' business—aboot puttin' a codicil to my will. Ye see, I hoped and hoped you and Kenneth would mak' it oot together. I wished ye baith to profit by my bits o' property—but that's a' ower.'

'Dear uncle, you must think of Kenneth first; then, if you like to remember me, I shall be very grateful.'

'I'll not forget ye! But you mauna anger me: ye do sometimes. You are a braw lassie—that I am not denyin'—but ye think too much o' yoursel'—ye think nae mon good enough for ye. There's yon Baronet—Sir St John Lisle—he'd ask you to-morrow if you'd let him! I am auld and cauld, but I'm no sae dottled that I canna read what's in a mon's een—and he is a gran' gentleman. I'd like the folk to see Sandy Craig's niece "her leddyship."'

'But, uncle, I thought you despised and disapproved of titles?'

'Eh, they are just senseless toys, but I canna pit them oot o' the world, and I like the best o' a' things to come to me and mine! Then a fine rich man wouldna care for a tocher wi' his wife, and so I'd hae mair for Kenneth—wha must marry some gude, respectable, weel-to-do lassie, wha will need siller wi' her mon.'

'Ah, well, uncle, it will be time enough to talk about refusing Sir St John Lisle when he asks me! Now I am going to write to madame—what shall I say for you?'

'Eh, my best respects, an' I hope a blessing will licht on her new undertaking. But I see the boy coming wi' the bag; he'll hae the *Scotsman*, sae ye must read a bittie first. I'm varra keen to see how the election at Clachanbrig has gane — I'm fearin' it will be against the Liberals.'

Mona therefore had to restrain her ardour, and wade through long columns of local politics, before she could pour out her warm congratulations to her beloved Deb.

A brisk interchange of letters ensued —extremely brief on Madame Debrisay's side. Then came a pause, and the announcement in the *Times*,—'On the 29th, at the Registry Office, Paddington, General Fielden . . . to Geraldine, widow of the late Arthur Debrisay, formerly Captain in the Kaiserin Marie Therese Hussars.—No cards."'

It gave Mona a little additional sense of loneliness to think that sea and land stretched so widely between 'Deb' and herself, for, after, all Deb was her mainstay.

. . . . . .

Mr Craig's intention of journeying to Glasgow was postponed because he caught a very severe cold, and was obliged to keep his bed. This was a very trying time to the household, as the old man thought he was going to die, and demanded endless attention. It was therefore in the last week of January that, encouraged by a favourable change of weather, he set out on his travels. He only intended to be away two clear days, but on the morning of the second Mona

received a few almost illegible lines from him saying that he did not expect to get away till the following Saturday.

Of this welcome breathing space Kenneth took advantage to pay a flying visit to his Mary — leaving early one morning, and returning late the following night—an interval of utter loneliness which was most depressing to Mona.

Saturday broke brightly, full of promise for a fine day. Already a breath of spring came with the sea breeze to cheer and invigorate.

Before Kenneth and Mona had risen from the breakfast-table, where they had sat longer than usual talking of Mary, and discussing how and when the subject of Kenneth's marriage with her could best be broached to Uncle Sandy, a telegram was put into Mona's hands from that potentate,—'Will bring a gentleman with me. Best bedroom.'

'Who can it be?' said Kenneth.

'The lawyer, most likely,' returned Mona.

'I don't think he would give Mr Cochran the best bedroom.'

'If "the coming man" is to have the

best room, he must have a good supper. I shall see Phemie at once. The idea of a stranger guest is positively exciting! There are some grouse in the larder; if you would take the nets, Kenneth, and get some fish, I think I could manage a respectable dinner—yes, dinner it shall be. Oh, Kenneth!' with a sudden look of dismay, 'suppose it is Sir St John Lisle?'

'And what for should it not be Lisle? He is a fery nice man, and thinks fery much on you, Mona. I daursay it will be Lisle.'

'I hope not. He is frightfully particular, and rather an epicure. But it cannot be! What would bring him up here at this season?'

'May be to see you, cousin Mona.'

'He would not take that trouble,' she said, more to herself than to her companion, as she left the room to hold high council with the cook—to see to the rubbing up of what silver her uncle possessed—to interview the gardener—to set Jessie to prepare the best room, and keep up a good fire therein.

It was reviving to have something to do—something to anticipate. Even if the nameless visitor proved to be Lisle, he would be welcome after such an unbroken spell of monotony.

The rest of the day was busily employed till the shades of evening began to close—then having seen the table set and duly decorated with flowers; the claret placed in the temperature where it was to be drunk; the drawing-room made pretty, and good fires everywhere, Mona retired to dress.

'If it is Captain Lisle I need not look a fright,' she thought; 'if it is a stranger, my uncle will be pleased to see me at my best.'

She well knew Uncle Sandy's pride in his belongings, a pride which caused some painful struggles in his soul between the love of a good appearance and the love of pelf.

So she put up her rich golden hair in becoming coils and short wavy braids, arrayed herself in a polonaise of soft creamy muslin over her black satin skirt, and tied an old-fashioned enamel locket

with black velvet round the snowy throat which her open corsage permitted to be seen. This, and a large spray of red geranium and fern on one side of her bodice, were her only ornaments.

She was quite ready, and not dissatisfied with herself, some time before the hour at which the travellers were expected, so she sat down to the piano and played dreamily to Kenneth, who had also got himself up with care.

'They are late, are they not?' said Mona, and as she spoke the sound of approaching wheels made themselves heard.

'No,' he returned; 'the train must have been punctual—here they come.'

'Now the mystery will be solved!' cried Mona, rising and following Kenneth into the hall, where at the open door stood 'Wallace,' a fine, black collie, barking an uproarious welcome.

Uncle Sandy descended in a very dislocated fashion from the phaeton, with Kenneth's help, and advanced to meet Mona, who kissed him kindly.

'I'm awfu' weary,' he said; 'I hope the denner is ready?'

'Yes, quite ready, uncle,' she returned, darting a curious look beyond him at a gentleman who was in the act of crossing the threshold — a man not much above middle height, wrapped in a loose ulster, the high collar of which almost meeting the travelling cap pulled over his eyes, effectually concealed his face. He came forward under the lamp, and turning to him, Mr Craig said with unusual warmth,—

'I'm varra glad to see your mother's son under my roof. This is my niece—I was near saying my daughter—Miss Craig.'

The stranger threw back his coat and took off his cap. As he bowed, the strong light fell upon him, and Mona found herself face to face with Leslie Waring, greatly changed and looking years older, but still unmistakably Leslie Waring.

For a moment or two Mona felt blind and dizzy, so great, so sudden was the surprise. Then she recovered her-

self all the more rapidly, because he seemed perfectly unmoved — while she could only exclaim in an agitated voice,— 'Mr Waring!'

He said quietly, 'This is a most unexpected pleasure,' and took the hand she extended mechanically.

'Eh, mon!' cried Uncle Sandy, 'do ye ken Mona? How's this? ye never told me.'

'I had no idea Miss Joscelyn was in any way related to you,' said Waring, with a smile.

'Miss Joscelyn! There's no Miss Joscelyn here. This is my niece, Mona Craig!'

'I remember now,' said Waring quickly; 'I beg your pardon. I had the pleasure of knowing Miss Craig some years ago, in London.'

'It is varra remarkable; but there's time enough to talk about it a'. Go, tak' aff yer coat. Kenneth, show Mr Waring his room. Come, my bairnie, tell Jessie to bring up the vivers. I'm just faint like: it has been a cold journey.'

'Will you take a little whisky and water at once, uncle?' asked Mona, try-

ing to remember her duties with an effort, so dazed did she feel at this astounding re-appearance.

'Aweel, it might be better to do so. Just hang up my coat, will you. Eh, but you have a fire that's enough to set a' the chimneys in Kirktoun burning; still it looks gran'. The young mon will think auld Sandy Craig has a fine hoose o' his ain. It's varra strange your knowing each other.—Thank you, my dearie,' as she handed him his allowance of whisky and water.

'But, uncle, how in the world did *you* come to know Mr Waring?'

'Me? Aweel I knew him when he was a wee bairn, but it's lang years since. His mother was Mr Leslie's daughter. You'll mind my telling you o' the great hoose o' Maceachern and Leslie. Leslie was the gran' gentleman of the firm; and his daughter—eh, my word, but she was bonnie! she was the young leddy that ought to have been my wife, and this lad's eyes are jist like his mother's—she married a proud, upsetting Englishman; but the siller was hers, and

the boy was named after her father. He has been fulish, I'm fearin', and has spent a cruel lot o' money, gaming awful and racin' and rampaging. Something turned him wrong; noo, he seems more wiselike, and has settled doon on a farm in America. He cam over aboot some law plea, a bit o' money that was coming to him through his mother, and sae he came on to Glasga, to speak to Mr Cochran, who was aye the adviser of a' the hoose, an' there he found *me*. I was right glad to meet him, and—but here he is, and Jessie, too. The denner's ready. I'm glad to see you in my hoose, Mr Waring. Give me your arm. I am a puir frail body.'

Waring threw a smiling glance at Mona, as if asking pardon for preceding her, and led his host into the dining-room.

Mona took her place at the head of the table with an overpowering sense of embarrassment, mixed with self-reproach.

'Something had turned him wrong?' Uncle Sandy said; 'was she that "something?"'

Pride came to her assistance, however; she must not let him see how overwhelmed she really was. By a resolute effort she recalled her self-control, and played the part of hostess with sweet gravity and simple kindness; but though avoiding Waring's eyes, she keenly observed how greatly he had changed. He looked taller because he had grown thinner. His strong figure looked firmer and more set; his face, longer, darker, more embrowned, and grave, if not absolutely sad: it had completely lost the florid fleshiness of early manhood; his eyes, too, seemed larger and more thoughtful; but his long thick moustaches, drooping to either side, showed when he smiled that his rather large teeth were as brilliantly white as before; his hands, that used to be so creamy and plump, were burnt almost black, and showed both bone and muscle, as though they and hard work were well acquainted. Yes, he was changed wonderfully, and improved. His old good-humoured eagerness to please and to be pleased was replaced by profound re-

pose of manner, as if the effervescence of youth had entirely evaporated, and left a slightly weary but kindly quietude behind.

He ate his dinner as if he liked it, and did not say much; once he looked round the pretty, comfortable room admiringly, and exclaimed,—

'You cannot think, Mr Craig, how delightful all this seems to me. The bright silver and glass, the flowers, the look of refinement—these things want a woman's touch.'

'I suppose you have no young leddies oot yonder?'

'No; my partner, like myself, is a bachelor. Indeed, it has hitherto been too rough for ladies; but we are improving rapidly. We had nearly finished a log house when I left: quite an architectural mansion,' added Waring, laughing.

His laugh was still frank and pleasant.

'I hope your partner is an honest man,' quoth Mr Craig.

'I hope so too. Indeed, I believe he is. He comes of a respectable English family, and has been accustomed to the

life of a ranche since his early boyhood. He is a first-rate judge of cattle and horses; and if he had not much money capital to put into the venture, he contributes what is quite as valuable—knowledge and practice.'

'Eh, I'm no that sure. There's as much danger as profit sometimes in the knowledge of penniless men.'

'Oh, Watson is not penniless; and he is really a very good fellow.'

'That is fortunate,' said Mona, forcing herself to join in the conversation. 'I suppose you have no other companion?'

'None. A chance traveller asks for hospitality now and then, but he never stays long.'

'It must be a lonely life, though I should not dislike it,' said Kenneth.

'I certainly do not. There's freedom and plenty of work, and when night comes one is too tired for anything but a good night's rest.'

'And I daursay you are mair peaceful and content to be awa' frae yon powsowdie o' conceited fules and grinning

cheats they ca' the great world,' said Uncle Sandy viciously.

'Oh, human nature is pretty much the same in the wilderness or in the world of social life,' said Waring good-humouredly. 'It would be but poor philosophy to cry out against the world I have left because I played the fool there; on my head be it if I threw away fortune. There are as many good fellows—or as few good fellows—in one state of life as another.'

'I believe that,' said Kenneth. 'I should like well to see your place, Mr Waring.'

'Why don't you come out for a bit? It is a sort of life you would like, I think.'

'Eh, but he has his work cut oot for him here!' cried Uncle Sandy. 'He'll find it best to bide wi' me. Noo, tell me how mony head o' cattle have ye, forbye horses?'

And the three men plunged into talk, from which Mona collected that Waring had invested almost all the capital left him—after much wild extravagance and foolish speculation—in a ranche near the

famous medwoods on the Pacific coast, and that, as yet, he had realised very little, though his hopes were high, and he had evidently thrown himself energetically into the undertaking.

She kept silence gladly. Waring's presence—his steady composure, his quiet submission to the inevitable — touched her deeply. She longed to cry out,—

'Have you forgiven me? Can I atone for the pain I inflicted?'

But most probably he had nearly forgotten that he once loved her, and hoped to pass his life with her. She panted to be alone, to disentangle her thoughts — to master the disturbance of her mind.

As they seemed so absorbed in conversation, Mona thought she might slip away unobserved; but her uncle noticed her movement.

'Bide a bit, my lassie!' he cried. 'We've sat here lang enough; we'll a' come wi' ye to the drawing-room. You shall sing us a sang, and then I'll gang awa' to my bed. My niece sings fine, Mr Waring,' he added, as he took Mona's arm

'I know that, Mr Craig,' returned

Waring, opening the door for them to pass through; 'I remember her songs well.'

Mona felt that she blushed crimson, while she said, in a low tone to her uncle,—

'I have scarcely any voice to-night—do not ask me to sing.'

'Hoot, toot, my dearie! you'll please us weel.'

Mona stood a moment irresolute after Uncle Sandy had tumbled into the depths of his chair. Waring came to her side, and, looking kindly, and perhaps a little sadly, into her eyes, said,—

'Don't refuse, Miss Craig! You don't know what a treat the music of a woman's voice is to an exile like myself, especially as in a few days I shall go back to the wilds again.'

'Then I will do my best,' returned Mona simply, and she went to the piano.

The song she chose was a pretty, quaint German ditty she had learned while abroad —for she did not wish to revive painful recollections by singing anything that might be familiar to Waring. He moved

away, and sat in deepest thought while he listened.

'Aweel, that's not ane o' my favourites. I am not much of a musician—my opportunities have been scant—but I have an uncômon gude ear,' said Uncle Sandy. 'Give us a Scotch sang, my dearie.'

'If I am not presuming too far,' said Waring, coming over to lean on the piano, 'Might I ask for an old favourite, —"Robin Adair?"'

'Ay, that will do,' from Uncle Sandy.

'I need not have been so careful to spare his feelings,' thought Mona. 'I am making a fool of myself. It is an age since I attempted it,' she said aloud; 'but I will try it, if you like.'

It was dreadfully annoying, but she could *not* steady her voice. She could not keep a certain tremulous pathos out of her notes. Men were so conceited—they had such a high opinion of themselves, that perhaps Leslie Waring would fancy, as she was so upset at meeting him, that she regretted having rejected him. Ah, no; he was too frank and honest, too simple and unselfish, to need

the guarded treatment Lisle required. Lisle! Why, he was not comparable to Leslie Waring. What wonders time and trouble had done for the latter!

'Thank you,' said Waring, from his chair in a shadowy corner, where he had retreated when she began the song he had asked for. 'That was an immense treat.'

'Ay, there's nae music like Scotch music, nor is there any sangs for melody an' poethry, an' spirit, an'—an' historical value, like Scotch sangs,' said Uncle Sandy.

'I believe the Irish claim "Robin Adair" as their own,' said Mona.

'Claim it! I daursay they do,' said Uncle Sandy contemptuously. 'They'd aye claim everything; but if that lilt isna Scotch, aweel, I am no Scotch. Come, give me your arm, Mona,. I'll just gang to my bed. I'm awfu' weary.'

'Then maybe Mr Waring would like a smoke with me in the kitchen. I think we will have it all to ourselves in a few minutes,' said Kenneth.

'Thank you, I should. One grows a little too fond of the weed when one is freed from the restraints of society.'

'It's a very perneecious practice; but it's just talking to the winds to protest against it. Good-night, sirs. Kenneth, there are the keys. Mr Waring will need a drappie after his pipe.'

'Good-night,' murmured Mona, as she gave her arm to her uncle.

Waring bowed, but did not attempt to shake hands with her.

It was an infinite relief to be alone, and locked into her own room. For a long time she thought confusedly, or rather a confused mass of mixed memory and thought thronged her brain, without any effort of her will.

How vividly Waring's face, pale with painful emotion, the day they last met, came back to her. He had quite forgiven her: she felt that. He was a really good fellow. She wished they could be friends again, as she was with Kenneth; but that would never be, she feared. She never could feel at ease with him. He looked as if he had suffered a good deal. Was it her fault? Oh, no! she never could admit that. She should like to let him know that she had generally a very

good opinion of him, but how should she find time to do so, when he had said more than once that he would only stay a couple of days? What a curious contradictory jumble life was altogether! Mona felt unaccountably unhappy, and, laying her fair head on the pillow, she wept long and quietly before sleep closed her wet eyes.

CHAPTER VI.

MAN PROPOSES.

MORNING brought renewed spirit and fresh courage.

Mona could not help smiling at the singular combination of circumstances which brought her once more face to face with the man whose wife she had so nearly been. It was foolish to feel so uncomfortable about meeting him. As he was perfectly unembarrassed, she was resolved to imitate his composure, and treat him with friendly cordiality. He deserved consideration at her hands, for he had behaved to her with chivalrous forbearance.

Still, she did not leave her room quite so early as she usually did. She was de-

termined to run no unnecessary risk of a *tête-à-tête* interview.

Uncle Sandy and Kenneth were already in the dining-room when she entered, and went through the ceremony of infusing the tea before her uncle began the long, rambling, extemporary prayer with which he always opened the day. They had hardly risen from their knees, when Waring came in and wished the party good-morning.

'I hope you rested weel?' said Uncle Sandy.

'I was extremely comfortable, but I dreamed furiously,' he replied. 'I seemed to have lived over my whole life since we parted last night. I hope the strain of Scotch blood in my veins has not developed a tendency to second sight, now that I am in my mother's native land, for I have had quite awful warnings in my visions. Some disaster hangs over me. However, that is nothing new, and I suppose I shall live through many more before I have done with things.'

'Shall I give you tea or coffee, Mr Waring?' asked Mona.

'Coffee, please.'

He turned towards her, and suddenly meeting her eyes, the colour rose in his brown cheek.

'Were your dreams in the morning?' she made haste to ask, anxious to hide her own confusion by speaking.

'Yes! It was daylight when I woke from the last and worst.'

'Then be of good courage. The evil in your dream will prove good in disguise, and you will get your wish.'

'Thank you! I accept the omen from your lips!'

'Are ye no for parritch?' asked Uncle Sandy. 'It's varra wholesome and strength'nin'.'

'Thank you, no. This hare pie is excellent.'

'I wish Mary Black were here,' observed Mona to Kenneth. 'She is a little witch for reading dreams and telling fortunes!'

'Ay, she's a witch! That is *fery* true, Mona.'

'Uncle!' cried Mona, 'may I ask Mary Black to come and stay here again? I have not seen a female face for months.'

'Yes; you can ask her. She is varra welcome. It's a nice blithe lassie,' explained Mr Craig to Waring, 'and sings as sweet a lilt as you'd hear anywhere.'

'Sorry I have so little chance of seeing her, sir. My time grows short.'

'Hoot, toot, man! Ye can stay till next week?'

'I am afraid I am too unfortunate to be able to accept your kind hospitality. I have business in London, and I want to take the Cunard boat on the 11th.'

'I dinna like to let you go. We'll talk aboot it, you an' me! Kenneth, is it going to be fine the day?'

'I think there will be showers.'

'You may be tolerably sure of that, Kenneth,' said Mona.

'I want to tak' Mr Waring round the place, and let him have a glint at Strathairlie.'

'Strathairlie?' repeated Waring. 'Hadn't Finistoun shooting hereabouts?'

'He has a deer forest—a great stretch of unreclaimed land, whaur hundreds of honest sheep ought to be grazing, instead

of its being a playground for a hantle o' feckless nobles,' quoth Uncle Sandy.

Waring, however, was too much occupied with his own thoughts to heed him.

'Didn't Finistoun marry one of the Everards?' he asked—'a very pretty girl?'

'Weel, she is a bonnie wee wife,' said Uncle Sandy; 'and, though she is a bit feckless, I didna object to her coming to see Mona. But they are a cauld, stiff, upsettin' fam'ly! It was weel for Mona she found a gude, kind uncle to tak' her in when yon Everard folk pit her oot.'

Waring glanced sharply at Mona, who coloured with vexation, and said haughtily,—

'It is not necessary to trouble Mr Waring with our family quarrels.'

'What's wrang wi' ye?' asked her uncle, in some surprise.

'You have capital sport about here, I suppose?' said Waring, as if anxious to change the subject.

'Yes—rod or gun, it's all the same.

You can fish or shoot the live-long day!' cried Kenneth enthusiastically. 'Sir St John Lisle said he never saw birds more abundant.'

'Lisle?' repeated Waring quickly, addressing Mona. 'I thought he was in India!'

'He returned on the death of a relation, whom he succeeded,' answered Mona briefly.

There was a short pause. Then Kenneth proposed that he should take Mr Waring for a round of the place, and along the road towards the Lodge, before dinner; and that after it uncle should show his guest the garden, the farmyard, and the stables.

They were still discussing their plans when Mona rose to visit Phemie, and hold high counsel anent dinner. She felt it a relief to escape Waring's eyes, though he rarely looked at her; and his voice, which had in it, to her fancy, a tinge of melancholy, that filled her with self-reproach. So, having completed her task downstairs, she went to her own room. Then, finding that the walking

to and fro and sound of voices had ceased, she concluded the pedestrians had started, and went to the drawing-room, intending to dust some few pieces of old china she had persuaded her uncle to buy while they were on their travels, with her own fair hands.

She had hardly commenced when approaching footsteps startled her, and Waring came into the room, and closed the door behind him.

'I thought you had gone out with Kenneth,' said Mona, laying down her duster, with a curious feeling of being caught.

'We were just starting when one of your uncle's tenants came to speak to him, and Mr Macalister's presence was needed in what they call "the museum."'

Mona smiled.

'You have not seen our museum yet?'

'No,' returned Waring, and there was a pause.

He stood looking at the fire, and she hesitated what to say next.

'I am glad to have this chance of speaking,' resumed Waring suddenly, and

looking full at her, a kind expression in his handsome, soft, brown eyes, 'for I want to explain that I would not have intruded on you had I had the least idea who the niece was about whom Mr Craig spoke with such very justifiable pride. I am afraid that—that I cannot be a very welcome guest to you!'

Mona murmured a polite denial.

'If you would let me speak frankly to you, I should be so glad. I don't want to say anything that would displease you!'

He coloured slightly, but his eyes laughed.

'Oh! I am sure you would not!' cried Mona. 'Yes! say anything you like.'

She felt herself again.

'Thank you. Well, I am very glad to see you, and awfully glad you have found a friend in old Craig. He *is* a character—excuse me for speaking so unceremoniously.'

'Of course! He really is very good to me, and I am fond of him, as I ought to be! But it is not very lively at Craigdarroch in the winter! Now, Mr Waring,'

coming over and standing by the fireplace, her hands clasped and dropped easily before her, 'I am *very* pleased to see you again, and shall be so glad to be friends—quite good friends—again.'

She smiled and blushed charmingly as she spoke.

'So shall I,' very shortly. 'Do you know I have thought and tormented myself a great deal about you. Oh, no!—not as I used, I mean; because I did not know what had become of you. I knew you did not stay on with the Everards. I am afraid they did not behave very well.'

'I fear I deserved their displeasure.'

'I don't think you did. How is Madame Debrisay?'

'Very well indeed, and no longer Madame Debrisay. She is married to General Fielden. I fancy you know him—an old artillery officer.'

'No! Is it possible? I remember old Fielden. It will be very nice for him to have such a capital woman to jog on with for the rest of the road. I always liked her.'

'Well, she returned the compliment.'

'I am afraid she would not have thought much of me if our acquaintance had continued. I was very weak and reckless.'

He looked steadily at her as he said this.

'I have heard something of the kind,' murmured Mona, unclasping her hands, and putting back her hair with a pretty, troubled gesture, as she generally did when in any little difficulty. 'And — and (we are to speak freely, you know) I was infinitely distressed. I feared *I* might in some measure—'

'No, no!' he interrupted. 'I see what you mean. It is the thought of a kind heart; but you are in no way responsible. I ought to have been man enough to do right for right's sake. No one is to blame but myself. I let that passion for gaming, which I confessed to you once,' he sighed quickly, 'quite overmaster me; in fact, it was a bad bit of my life just before that day I met you in Kensington High Street, walking with young Macalister. Then I had a severe attack of fever. I was

all but gone. If I had been of any value to anyone, I should have died, no doubt. After that I came to my right mind, and determined to do what I could with the remains of my fortune. In so doing I lost more. Then I fell in with my present partner, and threw in my lot with his. The life is healthy, and rather suits me. I shall stick to it, and, perhaps, make something of it. Do you know, it quite cheers me up to feel friends and all right with you, at anyrate for the few hours I shall remain; and even after, though, probably, we may never meet again, you'll give me a kind thought, and a good wish sometimes.'

'I always thought kindly of you,' said Mona gently, while she felt the tears in her eyes. 'You deserve so much from me! Yes, it is very nice to be good friends; and you must tell me all about your life in the wilds.'

'I beg your pardon!' cried Kenneth, bursting into the room; 'but I could not get away before. Come, we have lost too much time already.'

'Would your cousin come with us?' asked Waring. 'If she can walk so far. It is a fine morning. What do you say, Miss Craig?'

'I should like to come very much,' said Mona frankly. She felt delightfully at home and at ease once more. 'I must ask Uncle Sandy if he can spare me; and I can turn back when I have gone far enough, so as not to impede your progress.'

She went swiftly away to seek her uncle. Waring walked to the window, and stood with folded arms in deepest thought, quite oblivious that Kenneth was talking to him.

But Mona soon returned to announce that she had permission to absent herself, and in a few minutes the trio were climbing the hill side to gain the upper road by a short cut.

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It was a very delightful expedition. Waring said the scenery surpassed all he had ever seen before, for beauty, though he might have met with grander views. They found endless subjects for

conversation, and when Mona proposed to leave them, both gentlemen decided that they would return with her, as it would be unpolite not to return in time for dinner.

Mona was surprised at her own light-heartedness, at the delightful sense of harmony which soothed her spirit after her short confidential talk with Waring. How generous he was in exonerating her from all blame. How glad she was to be on frank, friendly terms with him. It was evident he had quite got over his old fancy for her, so they could enjoy each other's society with perfect safety for the little time he was with them. Alas! that it was so short. Well, let to-morrow take heed of itself, she would enjoy to-day.

And it went quickly, too quickly. Waring was shown everything about the place by Uncle Sandy himself, who generally bestowed a degree of attention and favour on his guest such as Mona had never seen bestowed on any other visitor. Then, in the evening, Waring seemed never tired of her songs — ex-

cusing his frequent demands on the score of his speedy departure to a land where the ditties of a cowboy, or the crack of his whip, were all the music he would hear.

Then came the inevitable hour of parting.

Waring had still some business to settle in Glasgow respecting the small sum he had inherited, and after a few days there he had to visit London, finally embarking at Liverpool.

Mona could hardly steady her voice to bid him good-bye. It seemed too cruel that he should be expatriated merely for a little — not a little — imprudence; and, say what he might, Mona could not but perceive that had she married him, he would never have committed the faults and follies which had changed his life.

Waring himself was quite calm and cheerful. He promised Uncle Sandy to write occasionally. He begged Kenneth to come and pay him a visit whenever it could be managed; and he looked for an instant, kindly and gravely,

into Mona's eyes, holding her hand in a painfully tight grasp; then he mounted the phaeton in which Kenneth was already seated, and they drove off.

'Noo they are awa',' said Uncle Sandy, as he hobbled towards the library, followed by his niece, 'we'll have yesterday's paper till the new ane comes. I read verra little.'

Mona made no reply; she would have given anything for half-an-hour's private thought, and the relief of tears, but this need must be concealed at any cost.

'Eh,' continued her uncle, falling into his chair, 'yon's an uncômmon fine young man. You see how the Scotch bluid tells in him. He was awfu' fulish an' led away for a bit, but he has come a' right, like a brave chiel; and he has his mother's eyes.'

'Then the late Mrs Waring must have had very fine eyes,' said Mona, rousing herself to speak cheerfully.

'Ay, she had that—she had that. From a' young Leslie (I canna bide his ither name)—from a' he tells me, I'm thinking he'll do weel oot yonder. It's

a rough life, but it's honest and healthfu', and he'll get mair good oot o't than he'd find among a pack o' proud, upsetting fule-bodies in London.' Then with a groan, 'Eh, but my limbs are bad the day. Noo, my dearie, just look at the City article, an' after that, there's something aboot the Colonies I want to hear.'

So Mona put away the strange, passionate regret which had overwhelmed her, and read steadily for more than an hour, by which time she was completely herself. Then Uncle Sandy wished for a walk, and took her arm, pottering about till nearly dinner time, and still Kenneth did not return.

'I wonder what keeps the lad,' said Mr Craig. 'He isn't often so long on the road; an' I begin to want my denner.'

'We need not wait for him.'

'Naw, but it wants mair than half-an-hour yet to the time. I'll tak' a cup o' milk wi' a drap o' whisky intilt, just to stop the craving.'

This refreshment administered, the old man took up the paper himself, and began to study the state of the Funds. He was

perfectly well able to read to himself, but his niece's soft voice and clear enunciation were luxuries to which he considered himself entitled, and Uncle Sandy was not the man to forego a hair's-breadth of his rights. Over the 'price current,' however, he loved to linger, and judge for himself, after Mona had skimmed it for him.

Mona went to put some fresh flowers in the drawing-room. She, too, was anxious for Kenneth's return; she hoped (as he was to call at the post-office) that he would bring her a letter from Mary accepting the invitation she had been permitted to send. She had grown fond of the gentle Highland lassie, and she greatly appreciated the companionship of an intelligent girl.

Mona resolutely directed her thoughts to some little plans of work and practice to be shared by Mary, when the distant sound of approaching wheels caught her ear, and, going to the window, she saw the phaeton crawling slowly up the steep road. Kenneth held the reins; but, could she believe her eyes, Waring was again

beside him! What had happened? He could not have missed his train! They had started in abundant time. Waring was leaning back in a languid manner quite unusual.

'Uncle Sandy!' she cried, running into the library, 'here is Mr Waring returning with Kenneth.'

'Ye don't say so!' cried Mr Craig, catching up both sticks, which always stood in the corner beside his chair, and moving with unusual rapidity to the front door,—'What's that for?'

Mona followed, her heart beating fast. They both reached the steps as Kenneth pulled up.

'Where's the gardener?' he cried, as he threw the reins on the back of the old horse and sprang down. 'Mr Waring has met with a bad accident, and can scarce get out alone.'

'Guid preserve us! what has happened?' cried Mr Craig. 'Rin—rin, and ca' Robbie; he's back frae his dinner.'

Mona sped swiftly to the garden without a word.

'It's a stupid business,' said Waring

cheerfully, but in a faint voice. 'I am afraid I shall be on your hands for some time. Macalister will tell you all about it. My right arm is broken.'

Here the gardener came running up, followed by Mona at a less rapid pace.

'Here!' exclaimed Kenneth, 'go to his left, Robbie; put your arm on his shoulder, Waring. I'll help you on the ill side.'

'I think I can get out well enough by myself.'

But when he tried to move, Mona saw that he winced and grew white. It was with great care and slowly that they managed to get him into the house. Then it could be seen that his right arm was bound up, and that his coat sleeve had been cut open.

'He had best go to his room at once,' said Kenneth. 'I have the doctor's directions; and there's composing medicine and what not in the trap. Come along, Phemie,' to the cook, who had hurried to the scene of action; 'and, Mona, fetch some wine.'

'I feel awfully ashamed of myself for giving all this trouble,' said Waring, his

eyes resting on Mona's for a moment with a deprecating glance.

She, still silent and pale from the shock she had received, went noiselessly and brought the wine by the time the little procession had reached Waring's room, which the housemaid had not yet dismantled.

She poured out a glassful, and placed it in his left hand, which, as she saw it trembled very much, she steadied with her own.

'I fear you are suffering,' she said softly.

'Oh, of course I am in pain, but there is nothing serious the matter; only I fear I must be a nuisance for some time.'

'It canna' be helpit noo, my laddie,' said Uncle Sandy, with unusual tenderness, 'and you are right welcome to my hoose.'

'He must get to bed!' cried Kenneth, with authority. 'That's the doctor's order. He must be kept *fery* quiet, to avoid fever. Mona, will you see that the things are taken out of the phaeton; and *the letters*, Mona.'

This done, there was nothing for it but

to wait till Kenneth was at liberty to explain the cause of the accident.

Meantime she found a letter from Mary, evidently written in high glee, accepting Mr Craig's invitation, and promising to be with her friends the following week.

'Noo, tell us a' aboot it, Kenneth!' cried Uncle Sandy, when they at length returned to the dining-room, after seeing Waring made comfortable.

'Well, you see, we were in plenty time, and when we found the ticket-clerk was not there, we went into the yard to look at some horses that were waiting for a box that was coming from Glasgow—for Waring is very keen about horses—and presently up comes Tulloch the grocer's big cart with some heavy boxes, and that wicked black mare of his in the shafts. The driver left the cart at the far side of the yard. Whether anything frightened the beast or no, I cannot tell, but all of a sudden it started off towards the gate, kicking and squealing. There was a decent-like woman and a bairn standing about, and the bairn had got in the way. There was a scream that it would be

killed. Waring made a dash for the child, and just threw it to the mother; but somehow in doing so he fell, and got a kick from the mare on the shoulder, while the wheel went over his arm. He was insensible for a few minutes. Then we got a bench and carried him to the doctor's, who, by good luck, was at home. He was some while setting it, for it's a bad break; but he says it was a mercy he was so far from the beast's hoof, or the shoulder would have been smashed, which would be a much more serious matter. As it is, it's a nasty bruise. Waring seemed chiefly put out about missing his passage, but I promised to write to his partner for him.'

'It was varra unlucky,' said Uncle Sandy.

'And there's his dream come out,' observed Kenneth.

'Ach! hold yer havers aboot dreams, an' sic like fule-talk!' cried Uncle Sandy contemptuously.

'Well, maybe it is; but I heard him mutter to himself something about "his fate," and *he* is not a superstitious Hielander.'

'Dr Donaldson did not think his injuries dangerous?' asked Mona.

'Oh, no! Specially if he did not get feverish. He's coming over to see him this evening. I'll just have the big easy-chair in his room to-night, and doze a bit in it, in case he wants anything.'

'Ay, 'twill be better so! If he could get a gude lang sleep, it would be the making o' him.'

It was a curious, disturbed, uneasy day. Uncle Sandy was especially restless, and time went at once quickly and slowly. Mona felt she could not settle to anything, and all waited eagerly for the doctor, who was later than they expected.

He pronounced the patient to be doing well; but much depended on his getting rest; and he finally sat down cheerfully to supper, and enjoyed a long 'crack' with Uncle Sandy afterwards.

The next few days were each a repetition of the other. Mona felt herself very useless. All she could do was to lighten the labours of the cook by instructing the housemaid to do a good deal in the kitchen.

The doctor came daily, and Kenneth was quite devoted to the sufferer when he was in-doors. At length the monotony was broken by the arrival of Mary Black, whose interest and excitement at the news which awaited her was considerable.

'I hope I am not in the way, Mona, dear? Why did you not put me off?'

'You will be of the greatest assistance, Mary. To-morrow Mr Waring is to be allowed to move into the drawing-room. The swelling and inflammation in his shoulder is almost gone; and Dr Donaldson says, that although he is to be kept quiet, he is not to be allowed to mope, so you must help to amuse him.'

'Is it me! Ah, Mona! I could not amuse a fine London gentleman.'

'Fine! Poor Mr Waring! In his most prosperous days he never had anything fine about him. It is wonderful how much an invalid increases the work in a house; and I shall be very grateful to you if you can do some of the reading to Uncle Sandy.'

The first time that Waring left his own room for the drawing-room was a great event.

He looked pale and languid, and his eyes seemed unusually large. Mona and Mary had placed cushions and plaids on the sofa, and were ready to welcome him when he came in, leaning on Kenneth's arm.

'So glad to see you able to get about again,' murmured Mona, placing a pillow to support his back, and another under his head.

'Thank you!' he said. 'It is almost worth while being smashed up to be petted and made much of. It is a new and delightful sensation for me.'

'You will soon be quite independent of us all! Let me introduce Miss Black to you—my one great friend. She is quite ready to assist in the process of spoiling you.'

'Where is Uncle Sandy?' asked Kenneth.

'In the garden, I think. He has a dispute with the gardener about asparagus, and he has found some passage in a book on the "Kitchen Garden," which he thinks will annihilate Robbie Sanders.'

'Suppose we go and find him,' said

Kenneth to Mary, who blushed vividly, and saying, 'If you like,' rose and went to find her hat.

Kenneth followed her. As he left the room Mona's eyes met those of Waring. They both smiled, and she felt that Kenneth had been very confidential to his new friend in their frequent interviews.

'Now, what can I do for you?' asked Mona gently. 'The doctor says that you are to be amused, though not excited.'

'Oh! if you would lap me in Elysium, read to me! I find I get awfully tired holding up a book.'

'With pleasure! What shall it be? The papers?'

'No, a book—any book.'

'Do you deign to read novels?'

'I have liked some novels.'

'We have nothing very new, but here is a volume of essays—Freeman's Essays, which are more interesting than many novels. Perhaps you have read them?'

'No, never! Would you mind sitting opposite to me? I shall hear you better!

Do you know, it seems to me as if some queen of romance was condescending to comfort her wounded servant!'

'You were not wounded in my service!' said Mona, a smile dimpling round her mouth. 'Now, you must not talk, Mr Waring.'

He bent his head, and so disarranged his cushions.

Mona gently replaced them, and began her lecture.

Waring listened, apparently with much interest, and occasionally made an observation which proved it; then she herself became absorbed in the charm of style and idea, and she read on for some time without looking up. When she did so, Waring's eyes were closed, and his head rested against the pillow. Mona thought he slept, and resuming, lest a sudden break might wake him, read a few sentences in a carefully-subdued voice, and then ceased and sat gazing at him with an expression of tenderness and compassion of which she was unaware.

Suddenly Waring opened his eyes and fixed them on her for a moment, with a

look of pain and sadness—but only for a moment, the next, he exclaimed,—

'You thought I was asleep, but I was not, I was only dreaming heavenly dreams.'

'That implies sleep,' said Mona, shaking her head.

'I can repeat the two last sentences,' said Waring, and he did so. 'I like books better than I did,' he continued. 'I used to be an awfully stupid chap at school. I fancy I was exceedingly youthful, not to say backward, for my years. Now you are tired—you must be tired: don't read any more.'

'I read much longer to Uncle Sandy; but you must have some jelly now. I will get it for you.'

'Was ever any fellow in such clover!' exclaimed Waring.

Then she brought it daintily, set forth on a snowy cloth, and held it for him, nor did he eat it up too fast.

'I did not think I should put our new friendship to the test so soon?' he said.

'This is not a test,' returned Mona

gravely, 'it is only the exercise of ordinary humanity.'

'Then how—' he was beginning, when Uncle Sandy came in full of pleasure and congratulations, and Mona left them together.

CHAPTER VII.

A DISCOVERY.

UNCLE SANDY had rarely appeared to such advantage as he did on this occasion. Leslie Waring was associated with perhaps the only wellspring of romance that had ever bubbled up for him in the somewhat arid plain of his life.

To him there were but two really great men in modern society, they were Maceachern & Leslie — the creators of the house with which he was so proud to have been connected. To have the grandson of one of these potentates under his roof, treating him with kindly respect, and making himself pleasantly at home,

was a treat to Sandy Craig's loyal, if rather tough, heart.

Waring's character and bearing too was calculated to gain upon such a nature as his host's. Society of the higher order had left its stamp upon his simple, unaffected manners, and the ready courage with which he turned from a life of mere pleasure to one of hard work, when he had still enough left to idle on, delighted the sturdy old 'man of the people.' Waring was, to his idea, a sort of glorified incarnation of middle-class merit, the result of plebeian energy, which even conquered and appropriated the graces of good-breeding.

This satisfaction was reflected on all around him.

The monthly settlement of house-keeping accounts—a crucial test which even Mona dreaded—was accomplished without a single growl. Poor Kenneth's arithmetical errors were passed over with a slight expression of contempt, in the term 'blunderin' gowk,' and the contradictions of Robbie Sanders, the gardener, were overlooked.

To Mona, this was an unaccountably delightful break in the monotony of her existence. To be good friends with Waring, to see that he was a better and a stronger man than formerly, these were sources of purest pleasure.

Then he was so very reasonable. He worried her with no expressive looks or words which insinuated lover-like feeling. He liked her to read to him, or to write for him; but he was nearly as well pleased with the services of Miss Black, nearly—not quite; and when in a talkative mood, he used to describe the wild beauty of his Californian home quite eloquently. He really had more in him than she at one time could have believed. He had grown quite good-looking too (Mona was keenly alive to exterior advantages), and she often thought, as he lay back on the sofa cushions, what an honest strong face he had, and how much the thoughtful sub-expression of sadness it had developed, beautified and ennobled it.

Then the temporary weakness of his strong frame appealed to the tenderness

of her most womanly heart: there was undoubtedly a friendly sympathy between them. Her voice never sounded so sweet, so expressive, as when she read or sang to him. But they were rarely alone together. Mary Black was not behindhand in delicate attentions, and, as Kenneth observed, both young ladies vied with each other who should spoil the invalid most.

To Mary, however, most of his talk and good-humoured chaff was directed. He praised her songs loudly, and said but little about Mona's, except now and then an imploring exclamation of 'Do go on;' 'Another, please, another.'

Uncle Sandy, however good-humoured, did not admit of any neglect, and always demanded an hour or more of Mona's time after their early dinner, while she read to him the better part of the famous *Scotsman*, and some portion of the *Times* weekly edition, which reached them every Saturday. Sometimes Waring slept on the drawing-room sofa during this exercise—sometimes he came to listen, while Mary and Kenneth disappeared; but occasion-

ally the former took her work and sat with the 'ill mon.' The murmur of their voices while thus engaged, with occasional bursts of merriment, came through the door of communication to Mona one afternoon, as she toiled through a heavy leader on 'municipal' government, and presently Mary put in her head.

'Mr Waring says it's so fine and bright, he would like a little turn, and I am going with him,' she said. 'We will be down the drive.'

'Dinna let him do too much!' cried Uncle Sandy. 'We will come along and meet you.'

Waring was now permitted to take exercise, and was rapidly recovering.

'What shall I read next?' asked Mona. 'There is an article on the Soudan—'

'Naw,' said her uncle—one of his most negative 'naws,' which always seemed to Mona as if it could stop a torrent—and he sat in thought for a minute; then he roused himself.

'I'm thinking,' he said, 'that Mr Leslie is growing ower fond o' Mary Black. They are aye at havers wi' ane anither, and

I am no varra pleased. She's no match for Leslie's grandson ; and yet the lassie is a guid lassie. I wadna see her vexed. He is a weel-spoken lad forbye — the sort to win ony woman's love. Eh, Mona ?'

'I do not think Mary cares much about him, uncle. Tastes differ widely, you know. As to her being no match for him, you must remember that Mr Waring has not much in the way of a home to offer. His—'

'Hoot, toot,' he interrupted. 'It will be a fair home enough. Young Leslie is going to be a successful mon after a bit.'

'I am sure I hope so ; but I do not think you need trouble about Mary. As to Mr Waring, I daresay he admires her—she is very sweet and charming ; but these fancies do not trouble men long.'

'Ay, the sort o' hempies *you've* been used to. But, my lassie, a real thouchtfu' mon, if luve taks hold on his heart, it grips it hard and fast, and will na let go. If young Leslie has let himself luve our Mary, he'll no leave her behind him. He doesna come of the sort that gives in.'

'Well I do not think that Mary is in love with him.'

'I hope you are right,' said her uncle slowly; then, after a pause, he began to struggle to his feet. 'Come,' he said, 'we will go and meet them.'

'As it is but a short way, uncle, could you get on without me? I have never answered Madame—I mean Mrs Fielden's last letter, and I should like to do so this afternoon.'

'So do, my dearie, so do. I'll just gang a bit down the road. Maybe I'll meet Kenneth.'

Mona escaped as quickly as she could to her own pleasant room, from the window of which she could catch a glimpse of the sea between two hills, and having hastily put out her writing materials, she sat down, leant her head on both hands, her elbows resting on the table, and fell into profound and painful thought.

Her uncle's words had suddenly bared the recesses of her heart, and lo! there lay an unsuspected root of pain and mischief.

That Mary was completely guarded by

her warm attachment to Kenneth, Mona did not doubt. That Waring admired her was possible, but she did not believe it was more than a kindly liking.

The revelation to her was this. If Waring really loved Mary, or any other woman, how was she to endure it? The mere idea filled her with despair. The terrible conviction grew upon her that she loved her rejected lover with all the warmth and tenderness of her fine rich nature, not in any half-hearted way, but glowingly, completely. She loved him for the straightforward, honest affection which made him hasten to offer her all he had in her hour of need. She loved him for the delicate consideration which had guided him in their brief engagement, for the forbearance with which he had released her, for the frank kindliness with which he had offered her his friendship when she had refused his love, for the stand he had made against his own follies and weakness, for the resolution with which he had cast off his attitude of lover to herself. She admired and loved his quiet, unpretending strength, his sunburnt face, his

big brown eyes that could say so much *if* they chose. Never again could she touch his hand without an electric thrill. She loved him! loved as she never before dreamed she could love, and all in vain. He had put off the lover for ever. She was from his life a thing apart; and he was, or could be, her whole existence. Yet, through all, she did not regret that she had rejected him.

'*Then*, I should have misunderstood him: we should have drifted apart, as we shall now; but at least I do him justice. All that remains to me is to hide my own feelings (he shall never pity me), and bid him good-bye for ever with tolerable composure. For ever! Ah! it is a hard, cruel fate!'

She was not of the sentimental, weeping order of young ladies. She sat, very white and still, and thought it all out, and resolved on her own line of conduct. She would be a kind, pleasant friend while they were together—and after! Then, indeed, would come anguish and despair, —a brief parting, probably to meet no more on earth.

Slowly she gathered herself together,

and collected her ideas. Then she wrote a long gossiping letter to Mrs Fielden, telling all the events of their little world. This accomplished, she gazed critically in the glass, smoothed her hair, and looked for her hat, hoping to efface any sign of emotion before meeting any of the party.

It so happened that Waring asked for one or two particular songs that evening. Mona sang them easily and sweetly.

'You have not had any bad news?' he asked, coming over to stand by the piano.

'No. What made you think so?'

'Ah, that I cannot tell! You look so pale. There was something—I do not know what—in your voice that made me fancy you were—not so bright as usual.'

'Why, Mr Waring, are you growing fanciful? You will be writing poetry next.'

'Perhaps I may! Do you and Miss Black never sing duets?'

'Oh, yes! We have one or two. Would you like us to sing together?'

'Yes; very much.'

'Come, Mary, and try "Oh, wert Thou in the Cauld Blast." I do not think we can do much in this way.'

When this was over, Mary was called to play chess with her host, Kenneth stole away to enjoy a private smoke, and Mona and Waring were effectually *tête-à-tête.*

'You are wonderfully better, Mr Waring,' said Mona, who for once was doing nothing, and sat ensconced in a deep arm-chair which was well in the shadowy recess of the window, away from the lamp, near which the chess-players were seated. Waring, somewhat weary after his walk, lounged on the sofa, from which, being still more in darkness, he could see her profile against the moonlit window.

'Yes'—suddenly, as if out of his thoughts—'that is exactly what I have been saying to myself. In short, I feel as if I were staying here on false pretences. I ought to be on the move.'

'I am sure my uncle does not think so!'

'No! He has been wonderfully kind,

though I have been troublesome enough to tire you all out!'

'We are not quite tired out yet.'

'Oh, you and Miss Black are a brace of angels; and, in short, I must stay till my arm is as strong as ever, which Donaldson promises it shall be. A right arm is important everywhere, but particularly in my new abode. Do I like the idea of returning? Oh, I sha'n't be sorry to be at work again; but the mere going will be awfully hard. I mean I shall be very sorry to say good-bye to you all.'

They were both silent for a few moments after this. Then Mona asked, in a low, dreamy sort of voice,—

'What is the chief work on a ranche?'

'There is so much that is chief, I hardly know which comes first. There are cattle and sheep to be looked after; and fields (we have wheat fields) to be ploughed, and sown, and reaped; and horses to break, etc., etc.'

'You have plenty to do then?'

'Oh, plenty; and then, lots of sport—such heaps of deer, and birds, and bears.'

'Bears! That must be rather fearful. Do they ever come near your house?'

'Yes, they come after the hogs. Part of our stock—a large part too—is a big drove of hogs.'

'Your partner is not exactly a gentleman?'

'Well one would hardly invite him to a South Kensington æsthetic evening party; but he is a very good fellow, a gentleman as regards keeping his word, and a first-rate shot!'

Another pause. Mona leant her head against the back of her chair, and gazed dreamily at the moonlight, which slumbered in silver radiance on the opposite hillside.

'When was Lisle here?' asked Waring, with startling abruptness.

'Oh, let me see! In the autumn—in September and October.

'I suppose he is the same cool hand as ever?'

'I see very little change in him, except that he looks a good deal older.'

'And he has the family estate now?'

I daresay he will make a good landlord. He understands his own interest.'

'I have no doubt he does.'

'I daresay he will be in town when I go there, but I shall not try to see him. I have done with that world.'

'It is a pleasant world when one is in it, yet I do not regret it either.'

'You? Oh, you will flourish in it, I have no doubt!'

'I imagine I am as much cut off from it as you can be.'

'No, no! Women like you must always be at a premium—in an ornamental, pleasure-seeking society; someone will persuade you to enter the ranks once more.'

Mona laughed—a low, mocking laugh—but did not reply.

'How is that capital woman Madame Debrisay—I mean Mrs Fielden? I always liked her.'

'She is very well, I believe, and must be at Biarritz by this time. Yes; she is the kindest, truest soul! How good she was to me, I can never forget.'

'And *I* shall never forget her either.

And Lisle — have you not seen him since?'

'Not since the autumn, or early winter. He called once or twice when I was with Madame Debrisay when she was so ill.'

'Oh, indeed!'

Another pause. Then Waring proceeded to inquire for Bertie Everard and many of their former mutual acquaintances, most of whom were lost to sight, and were by no means dear to Mona's memory.

'I suppose I ought to clear out of this in about a fortnight?' said Waring, as if to himself.

'Do not think of travelling until you feel sure of your strength,' returned Mona earnestly. 'It would be dreadful to be laid up in such a place as you describe your home to be.'

'Home! It certainly is not one's idea of home.'

'But as the place improves under your hand, you will grow fond of it.'

'I suppose so,' rather dejectedly. 'Of course, I do not intend to end my days there.'

'Oh, no! of course not. When you make a fortune, you will come back to England.'

'A fortune! If I can screw competence out of it, I shall be lucky.'

'Competence is enough for anyone,' said Mona.

'Yes! I know you do not care for money,' returned Waring quickly.

Then they both blushed, and there was a silence of some minutes.

'I suppose Lisle will be up here again?' resumed Waring, rather abruptly.

'Perhaps! I do not think it likely. I believe my uncle is already in treaty with someone else for the shooting, so there will be nothing to come for.'

'Nothing to come for,' repeated Waring, as if to himself; and Mona suddenly thought—'Does he imagine that *I* am the attraction to St John Lisle, and does his friendliness incline him to rejoice at the prospect of a good marriage for me?'

She rose, and went into the next room to find a book, for an excuse not to talk any more. As she returned, she met Waring, who had followed her.

'Good-night,' he said. 'I am rather tired. Miss Black is booked for chess, and you are going to read, so I had better go to bed.'

'If you would like me to read to you—' began Mona, for there was something desponding in his tone.

'No, no! I exact too much,' he interrupted. 'I will leave you in peace.'

'You know you *exact* nothing.'

'That is true. You all give freely. Nevertheless, I will say good-night.'

. . . . . .

It seemed strange to Mona that Uncle Sandy—who, though on the whole extremely indifferent to things which did not affect himself, was, when his attention was aroused, a keen observer—did not notice the complete understanding which existed between Kenneth and Mary, nor the very lover-like attentions which, as he grew more at ease in his new home, the young Highlander could not refrain from bestowing on the lady of his heart. But, as many strong-willed persons do, Uncle Sandy was very apt to make plans without taking into account the individual

likings or dislikings of the persons affected by them.

She rather dreaded the moment when the ruler of Craigdarroch would awake to the knowledge that the 'bit lad and lassie,' as he considered them, had taken their lives into their own hands, irrespective of his consent. If he was angry and unreasonable on the subject, it might be terribly bad for both young creatures, though his evident liking for Mary was a great point in their favour. Indeed Mona wished to turn her thoughts from the pain, the dull aching which oppressed her, to *pros* and *cons* of her friends' fortunes.

It was a few days after the above recorded conversation, Mona was in the library, entering sundry items in an account book, which her uncle had great pride and pleasure in teaching her to keep in the most orthodox fashion.

It was a lovely day stolen from May to beautify the last hours of March. The blue sky, the glittering loch, the balmy air which stole like a caress round cheek and throat, seemed to

promise that 'gloomy winter was awa'.'

Kenneth had taken a holiday from the spring operations of field and byre, and proposed to take Waring and Mary for a drive through Strathairlie and Balmuir, that the former might see some of the fine views in the neighbourhood, as his time was now growing short.

Mona volunteered to remain with her uncle, and—with a degree of unreasonableness, for which she scorned herself—felt hurt that Waring had made no attempt to persuade her to come with them.

Mr Craig had been pottering about the garden, and Mona thought she had heard the tap tapping of his stick in the hall just before the excursionists had driven off.

The sound of the wheels had hardly died away, when Uncle Sandy came into the room and threw himself into his arm-chair, upsetting the fireirons with an unusual amount of clatter.

'Guid preserve us!' was his first exclamation. 'They're gane clean daft!

Wha'd hae thought o' such—such perversity!'

'What is the matter, uncle?' and Mona came over to stand on the hearth-rug opposite him.

'Matter! it's the deil's own matter. Listen to me. When I cam' in frae the garden, I saw the chaise at the door, and I went into the hall to ca' them, and was nigh slippin', but got on to the bit carpet, and into the drawing-room; an' what should I see but Kenneth standin' by the window wi' his arm round Mary Black, and her head on his shoulder, as if she war weel used to it! He was saying, "My ain love it's hard to have patience;" but, before I could break oot upon them, I heard Mr Leslie's voice behind me, and, before I had rightly recovered my senses, they were awa'. Noo! what do you think o' such a pair o' eediots—o' worthless, unprincipled eediots?'

'Well, uncle,' began Mona, after a short pause, 'I am not surprised. Anyone might have seen they were growing fond of one another; which was not to be wondered at, for—'

'And do you mean to tell me,' almost screamed Uncle Sandy, 'that ye saw it, and suspected it a' the time, and never warned me?'

'I do not see that it was my duty to do so,' said Mona, instinctively feeling that a bold tone was best; 'especially as I think Kenneth and Mary would make each other very happy, and you too, uncle. You know what a sweet—'

'You'll just drive me aff my heid!' he interrupted. 'Don't ye see that Kenneth needs a wife wi' a tocher—a bit siller!—a carefu', thoughtfu' woman wha'd be a guide and a stay to him, not a bit lassie that he'll be Dauvid an' Solomon and the rest to.'

'I fancy there is much more probability that Kenneth would be all the wiser and stronger for the companionship of a woman that looks up to him.'

'Whaur's the use of argufying? Mary Black is no the wife I want for my nay-few; an' if he crosses me, I'll just pit him oot. Why should I gie my money to a feckless loon wha hasna the sense

to consult me in the maist important step o' his road?'

'But, uncle, of all the steps a man can take, the most important to himself is matrimony. Now, where would you find a sweeter girl than Mary? You miss her yourself when she goes; can't you fancy her and Kenneth making a happy home for you and caring for you? Suppose he married a rich girl, who had been educated at some first-rate school, do you think she would be content to live here as your housekeeper, and have no change from year's end to year's end?'

'And what for shouldn't she?'

'I do not know why; but I am quite sure most girls would tire of Craigdarroch, sweet and lovely as it is; even I do.'

'You!—you tire of a braw home like this?'

'Oh, I shall be pleased to come back; but I like to go away sometimes; and *I* am old of my years.'

'Aweel, I deserve that o' Kenneth that he shouldna hae spoken to a lassie without asking me first!'

'Why, that is more than a father could expect from a son; and, besides, we do not know how long these two may have loved each other — perhaps before you had any claim on Kenneth.'

'Ech, the follies o' children dinna reckon!'

'Don't you think if Miss Leslie had loved *you*, uncle, you would have clung to her though "faither and mither and a' should go mad"?'

'Ah, my lassie, but that was a' different. She was a gran' young leddie, wi' five figures to her tocher; an', Mona, my dear, a mon thinks a deal o' the girl that's just abune his reach.'

'Perhaps so, uncle; but the *true* man thinks the girl within his reach just as sacred and precious, if she is dear to him.'

A quick sob rose in Mona's throat as she spoke, and Uncle Sandy, in his quickened condition of mind, observed,—

'What's wrang wi' ye?' he asked. 'You're no fond o' the laddie yoursel'?'

'Only in a sisterly way, I assure you. I am deeply interested in his welfare.'

'Sae am I; but I canna see it's for his welfar' to wed wi' a penniless bairn.'

'A bairn that would look on you as a father, and be a daughter to you, Uncle Sandy!'

'Naw, it's no use telling me sic a like tale. I doot that onybody wad be as guid to me as you are, Mona; and I want Kenneth to get a fortin' wi' his wife, that I may gie you a better tocher, my dearie. You'll wed a gran' gentleman some day, and you *must* be weel tochered.'

'Uncle!' cried Mona earnestly, 'you must not think of that! My possible marriage is a long way off, and I will go away and leave you if you let me come between my cousin and happiness.'

'If you must go, you must,' said Uncle Sandy sternly, though his voice was unsteady. 'I did without you before, and I can again.'

'That is for you to consider. Now, uncle, make me a promise.'

'What is it?' he asked cautiously.

'While Mr Waring stays, make no disturbance. He has been so comfortable here, let him take away his good impression unimpaired. If you speak to Kenneth, and show displeasure, Mary

will go away, and her people will forbid her to speak to Kenneth; our pleasant life will be broken up; I shall be too distressed to remain; I shall accept General and Mrs Fielden's often repeated invitation to go and stay with them in Paris; and you will bully poor Kenneth till he does not know a mangle wuzzel from a kale.'

'You are just a trifle too clever, missee!' said Uncle Sandy, irritated, but not conquered. 'I dinna understand why you are so strong on they fules' side. However, I'll mak' no disturbance whiles Mr Leslie is in my hoose. But promise—for promise you must—gie me your word not to let them know I am acquaint wi' their foolishness.'

Mona was silent for a moment or two, while she thought that it would do no good to put the offending pair on their guard.

'Very well,' she said; 'I promise. But you must not be cross; you must be nice and kind, as you have been.'

'I'm muckle obleeged to you for the compliment,' dryly.

'And, uncle, don't think I want to leave

you. I am grateful to you, and I like you; I am interested in you, for you are full of character; but if you are unjust to Kenneth on my account, or if you doubt me, and try to worry me into marrying anyone I do not like, I shall just go away, because—'

'Because what?' asked Mr Craig, somewhat struck by her tone.

'Because I do not care a straw what becomes of me!'

She turned and left the room abruptly.

Mr Craig looked after her, immensely puzzled.

'What's come to the lassie?' he said. 'She's nae like hersel'. She is just deep in luve wi' Kenneth. I always thocht it, and I am seldom wrang. I'll keep a calm sough, an' maybe things may come right. That Mary is a bonnie girlie, douce an' handy—but, na, na! there are few can come up to my ain niece!'

CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

THIS premature discovery was very embarrassing to Mona. Her conviction that it would make matters worse if Mary or Kenneth knew that Uncle Sandy's eyes had been opened, gave her courage, however, to keep it a secret from the parties most interested. It would be a great gain if he grew accustomed to the idea of the engagement before he was able to fly out and pledge himself to opposition, for to an obstinate, headstrong nature like his, retraction was almost impossible. He had an immense contempt for men who threatened and did not execute.

But Mona felt infinitely depressed, and

singularly lonely. *If* she could but see the question of Kenneth's engagement set at rest, she would certainly take leave of absence and pay her dear Deb a visit. Not that she could ever tell even that dear friend the secret of her inner sorrow; but the sound of her kind voice—the change, would bring relief.

Uncle Sandy was in a very queer temper after this discussion. He was querulous and complaining, yet occasionally obsequious to his niece, on whom he had grown very dependent, and of whose independence he stood in awe.

Waring felt that something had gone wrong, and watched Mona's expressive face with profound sympathy.

'Let me come with you,' he said, one afternoon, when she had complained of a headache, and begged Mary to read to Mr Craig, while she went to try the fresh air cure.

'Very well,' she returned. 'I will show you my favourite haunt.'

They proceeded through the grounds into the group of oak trees beyond. On the edge of the little wood was a bench,

from which was a view of the sea, between two rocky hills. A narrow ravine opened steeply down to the beach, widening as it descended, and here, on its sheltered sides, the first primroses, the earliest yellow honey-scented gorse blossoms were to be found. Behind the seat were big grey boulders, scattered among the tall brackens, and from the little space of level ground where it stood, the hill side rose steeply up.

'It is a delicious place to read in,' said Mona, as they sat down. 'On a very still day you can hear the dash and ripple of the waves down there like a soft accompaniment to your thoughts, or the thoughts you are reading. Then, later on, the hum of the bees as they gather the honey from the whins, as Uncle Sandy calls them, makes a complete harmony with the whisper of the wavelets. It is enough to make a poet even of my uncle.'

'I daresay,' said Waring, resting his elbow on his knee, and his head on his hand, while his eyes dwelt on hers with the grave, yearning expression they often wore—'I daresay your uncle thinks he

might be the best poet in the kingdom, if he "laid his mind to it," as he would say himself.'

Mona laughed.

'Very likely. I suppose his good opinion of himself has been a lever to hoist himself withal.'

'No doubt. It strikes me he is very exacting. You have seemed to me weary, and—and depressed, of late. Does he worry very much?'

'He is really very good. I have nothing to complain of. I have been depressed lately because I am puzzled. I am greatly tempted to tell you why, and to ask your advice.'

'Do,' said Waring, changing his position, and looking out to sea. 'At least you may trust me to keep counsel, and if I can *do* anything, need I say, command me?'

'Then here is my story.' She proceeded to detail the history of Kenneth's engagement, and Uncle Sandy's accidental discovery. 'You see it is a very serious matter,' she concluded. 'Kenneth is quite dependent on Uncle Sandy, and were he

out of favour, and dismissed, both would be in a very hopeless condition.'

'I see that. I trust old Craig won't turn rusty: it would be very cruel. How can anyone be in the house with them and not see the state of affairs? They seem to me made for each other. But you have done the best you could in getting your uncle to keep quiet. He will get used to the idea.'

'Then, Mr Waring, the help you can give me — I mean us—is to talk in a natural, easy way to Uncle Sandy about Kenneth's engagement, as if you considered it a settled thing, from your own observation.'

'Well, I do,' said Waring.

'My uncle, I can see, has a very high opinion of you—you have a sort of mysterious influence upon him—so you must give Kenneth and Mary all the help you can.'

'My having any influence on so shrewd a man as Mr Craig must seem a considerable mystery to you,' said Waring, laughing. 'I feel much flattered, and will do the best I can for the cause.'

Both were silent for a few minutes, then Waring asked a little abruptly,—

'Where is Madame — I mean Mrs Fielden—now?'

'In Paris, where they intend to make some stay.'

'I was in hopes they might be in London. I should like to see Mrs Fielden again—I think she is a capital woman!'

'She is indeed!—a true, loving friend! And when do you think of leaving?' asked Mona, steadying her voice by an effort.

'Oh, about this day week! I must go then. And my arm is nearly as good as new. By the time I get to the end of my journey, I shall be quite fit for work.'

'And—and how do you like the idea of going back to the woods?' this in a low tone.

'Like it! There is no use in thinking about liking what must be. I have cut myself adrift from every other kind of life, so I must and will make it answer; but it—it's an awful wrench to go. I can't deny that! Still—' He broke

off, and meeting her eyes, exclaimed,—'If you look so sorry for me, I shall make a fool of myself. That is,' flushing sympathetically as he saw her colour rise, 'I shall whine and bemoan my hard fate, in a fashion that will not increase any gleams of respect you may have for me.'

'Is she afraid I am forgetting the bitter lesson she once gave me?' thought he.

'Does he imagine I am fishing for an avowal of the affection which has died out?' thought she.

'I assure you I do not suspect you of any such weakness. I daresay you will find your new home and life pleasant enough.'

'Oh, very likely! Indeed, given certain conditions, I can imagine enjoying life on the ranche very much—though we are twenty-five miles from the nearest "city," as it is called—and it is merely a big village, minus the rusticity of a village, and plus the gas, the gilding, the looking-glasses, the gambling, the cheating, the orgies of a big modern town.'

'What an awful place!' said Mona. 'You must be glad to have twenty-five miles between your home and it.'

'Between my place of abode and it,' he returned. 'Well, yes! though there are inconveniences. Yet you would be surprised if you knew how many good fellows—kindly, brave, generous—are scattered about among the general rowdy population, like nuggets in dirt. Are you going—'

'Yes, you have sat here long enough. The sun is beginning to go down.'

'You forget that a broken arm does not constitute an invalid. I am as strong as a horse now.'

'Perhaps so. Then the country is very fine about these dreadful "cities"?'

'Superb! The redwoods on the edge of which I am located are the finest stretch of forest you can imagine. I am afraid to tell you the dimensions of the trees—you would think I was romancing; then the beauty and luxuriance of the undergrowth, such feed for hogs—not very interesting stock, I acknowledge, but very profitable—while in the more

open spaces, and where it has been cleared, such a soil for wheat. Then, of course, we have a number of *employés*—hunters, herdsmen, keepers of various kinds, and some Chinamen for servants. The climate is perfection, the sunsets and sunrisings marvellously lovely.'

'What a wonderful country! You ought to be happy there.'

'There are one or two things wanting—still one cannot have everything. You see, my friend and partner Wells is a queer fellow, sharp and clever in his way. He got hold of this ranche by a lucky chance. An old hunter had got it for a song some years ago. He did a good deal in clearing and improving, till he came to the end of his cash, and got sick of being settled. So Wells bought it as it stood cheap enough, then he found he hadn't a penny left. Just about that time I wandered into San Francisco and met him, so we entered into partnership. I hope to buy him out by-and-by.'

'I think,' said Mona, 'were I a man, I should rather like the life; but it must be lonely.'

'Oh, it would be terrible for a woman, I am afraid,' said Waring, with a sigh. 'I must take out some tough books with me, to provide for the winter evenings.'

'How long shall you be in London?'

'About a week.'

'It will be full, as it is near Easter. Shall you not look up some of your old friends? The contrast would amuse you.'

'No, I have done with all that! There are some relations of my father's on whom I must call—but I really do not care to see anyone else.'

This conversation had lasted while they made the tour of a stony, heathery piece of land outside the low, moss-grown wall which enclosed the lawn and bit of pleasure ground, and came out upon the road leading to Kirktoun.

As they paused to look at the sunset, and just as Waring had uttered the last words, a gentleman on foot came round a turn of the road. Waring's brow contracted; he glanced swiftly at his companion, and exclaimed,—

'By Jove! it is Lisle!'

In another moment Lisle was lifting his hat and shaking hands with Mona.

'Waring!' he exclaimed, in a tone of extreme surprise. 'Waring! by all that's astonishing. Where — how — what has brought you here?'

'Chiefly railways and steamboats.'

'My uncle knew some of Mr Waring's people. They met in Glasgow, and Mr Waring came back with him.'

'I thought you were lost for ever!' cried Lisle, in a tone which did not express very lively pleasure at his turning up again.

'Well, here I am, you see, considerably the better for a sojourn in the wilds.'

'So it seems. Why, you look years older!'

'Now, Sir St John, pray account for yourself,' said Mona. 'Your sudden appearance requires explanation, as well as Mr Waring's.'

'Does it?' said Lisle, flashing a quick glance into her eyes. 'Well, Finistoun was coming north for a little rest and fishing, so, as we both had had enough

of gay and festive scenes for the present, I came with him, and am staying in my old quarters at Kirktoun for a day or two. "How is a' wi' ye?" as your quaint old uncle would say.'

'We are all remarkably well. He will be a good deal surprised to see you.'

'More surprised than delighted, I suspect.'

'It takes a great deal to *delight* Uncle Sandy; but I think he was always placidly pleased to see you.'

'And how goes the Highland cousin? Has he grown reconciled to his uncle's plans?'

'Oh, no!' cried Mona, laughing; 'he is more irreconcilable than ever.'

Then Lisle asked for Madame Debrisay, and described with cool sarcasm the surprise and indignation of General Fielden's friends at that warrior's marriage.

Waring was very silent. Mona's quick intelligence told her that each man was annoyed by the sight of the other; Waring, of course, did not care to meet the man who had advised a step which led to pain and mortification; while the other—

well, she understood his irritation clearly enough.

Lisle imparted a good deal of London gossip before they reached the house, and was then duly introduced to Uncle Sandy.

'Eh, but I'm varra pleased to see you!' he said, with unusual warmth. 'It's an uncômmon time o' year for a Londoner to come amang the hills.'

'You see, Craigdarroch always has its attractions.'

'Maybe so, maybe so. It will be lookin' brawly in another month. And now you'll tak' a bit supper wi' us. We have supper at eight, and Kenneth will put you on your way back.'

'Thanks; I shall be most happy. I need not trouble your nephew. In your well-ordered country the roads are as safe at midnight as mid-day.'

'That's true!' emphatically. 'I am glad you're aware o't. That great, lang, self-opeenionated young woman—how d'ye ca' her?—that just turned up her nose (mair than nature had done for her) against Scotland to a Scotchman!—that wasna

weel-mannered for a lady that goes to the Queen's Court, they tell me.'

'Oh! the Court is a regular *olla podrida* now,' said Lisle.

'A what? What tongue is that?'

'Spanish. It means a general mixture.'

'Eh, powsowdie is the same thing; that's rale Scotch, and mair expressive and wise-like. Weel, that tall leddy would hold her ain in the biggest powsowdie of a'. Where is she?'

'You mean Miss Morton! She is the most appalling female I know. She has captured a Greek prince, who goes to balls in a white petticoat, and says he is descended from Alcibiades.'

'Eh, he wad be a shifty sort of a great-grandfather to have!' cried Uncle Sandy, who piqued himself on being a 'soond claussical scholar.'

'Well, this fellow is about up to her shoulder, and rather a doubtful personage. They are fighting over settlements at present; for though she is said to be fathoms deep in love, she does not like to lose her grip of the L. S. D.'

'And varra right she is. Noo, the tea is ready, come awa' and have a cup.'

It was, on the whole, an uneasy sort of afternoon and evening. A sense of unfitness—a want of harmony, oppressed everyone, though Mona and Kenneth did their utmost to entertain their guests. Both the girls sang and played and talked their best. Indeed, Mona was unusually gracious to Lisle, yet he was dissatisfied, and left with Kenneth early, saying that he was bound to Lord Finistoun for the next day, but the following he would come to see them, as he was going back to town on Saturday night.

At luncheon next day, when the post came in, Waring, after reading his letters, announced that he must start on Monday, that he had been away too long, and it was time he returned.

To Mona this was a cruel stab. He was, then, to vanish away from her—this frank, kind, brave man, whose qualities were the complement of her own, for whose troubles she felt responsible, and whose wounds it would have been the sweetest and most congenial task to heal,

and she dared not try to hold him! No; if it cost her her life, she could make no effort to reveal herself. He was her friend, and nothing more. Yet a vague, dim belief breathed through her heart that he loved her still, to justify which there was not a tittle of evidence.

'I did not know you were here,' said Miss Black, coming into the drawing-room the day after this visit, and finding Waring seated with a book before him and his head on his hands. 'Where is Mona?'

'She has gone out with Mr Craig.'

'Will you come with me and look for them?'

'No, thank you; I am searching for one or two books I brought here, and I want to put them up. You see, I have only two days after to-morrow.'

'I *am* sorry you are going, Mr Waring.'

'I am gratified to hear you say so. How sorry I shall be to leave you all, it would not be easy to say.'

'Well, I think you look sad like, Mr Waring. You must write Kenneth, and tell us all about yourself.'

'Mary!' exclaimed Waring, after a

short pause, and not aware of his own familiarity, 'what do you think brings that fellow Lisle here?'

'He says it's fishing; and so it is, but not with a rod and line.'

'Then it is Mona?'

Mary bent her head in the affirmative.

'At least I fancy so,' she said. 'He used to be up here in the autumn, and Kenneth thought he would have asked her then.'

'I suppose it will be what is considered a good match; but she is too good for him!'

'You might say that of a good many.'

'You think so?'

'Yes. Don't you?'

'I do; and I suppose Miss Craig will soon be transformed into Lady Lisle.'

'I cannot think so; she never seems to me to care about him. I have always imagined she loves someone we know nothing about; but I have no right to say so.'

'No, we have no right to conjecture what she feels or thinks; only I trust in God what she does, and whoever she chooses, she will be happy.'

He left the room abruptly as he uttered the words.

'Ah!' exclaimed Mary aloud, as she looked after him, and then stopped to run over in her own mind a dozen or more of slight indications, which, viewed by the new light that had broken in upon her, made proofs as strong as Holy Writ of the feeling entertained by Waring for her admired friend. 'And oh! she does not care for him either, and he is honest and true—I am sure he is,' thought Mary. 'Stay! doesn't she care for him? I am not so sure. Oh! where is Kenneth? I will go and talk to him.'

. . . . . .

The morning after this conversation rose bright and fair, though the night had been so stormy that between the howling wind and her own distressful thoughts Mona got little sleep.

'I must go down to the fishers,' said Kenneth at breakfast. 'I hear the two Mackilligans have been nearly drowned, and their boat is stove in. Jock is severely hurt. They were driven ashore in the gale last night.'

'I'll come with you,' said Waring.

'You are just killing yourself,' said Uncle Sandy, who was busy supping his porridge. 'You look like a ghaist as it is! You'll no be fit for a lang journey if ye gang this gate.'

'Oh! I am perfectly fit, I assure you, whatever my looks may be. If I did not rise up like a giant refreshed after the care and nursing I have had in this establishment, I should not be worth taking care of.'

'Weel, I dinna ken what's come to ye a'; there's Mona wi' a white face, and you wi' a lang ane, and Kenneth's like a bag o' banes. Mary is the best o' ye. It is a comfort to look at a cheerfu', healthfu' countenance,' said Uncle Sandy, who had been extremely fractious for the last ten days.

'What a compliment, Mary! I feel quite ashamed of myself!' cried Mona.

'Let me know when you are ready to start,' said Waring to Kenneth, and soon after the two young men started to see what assistance they could afford to the shipwrecked fishermen, Uncle Sandy call-

ing out injunctions to Kenneth as he went not to commit him 'to mend a' the broken boats in the parish.'

'And wha'll drive me into the toun?' asked Mr Craig. 'I must gang to the bank, forbye the minister's and Jimmy Tulloch's.'

'Mary will go with you, uncle. I have rather a headache, and I daresay Kenneth and Mr Waring will be back to luncheon.'

'I hope so. I am no weel content wi' Mr Leslie. I hope you have nae been fashing him wi' your idle clavers. He needs rest and kind treatment.'

'I think we have been very good and prudent, eh, Mary?'

'Aweel, let us have the denner at one o'clock punctually.'

'I will see to it, uncle.'

The dinner hour came, but brought neither Kenneth nor Waring, and Uncle Sandy having been comforted with a good many 'draps o' whisky,' and wrapped up with care, started, under Miss Black's escort, for the diminutive town of Kirktoun.

It was a relief to Mona to be alone, but it oppressed her to be within doors.

She got her hat, and threw a plaid round her shoulders, intending to commune with her own heart in the fresh, sweet air.

'I must put away this deplorable weakness. Where is my pride, that I cannot resist this overwhelming tenderness for a man who does not care about me?'

'If the gentlemen return and ask for me, Jessie,' she said to the housemaid, who was doing some extra dusting in the hall, 'I shall be by the wood, at the big oak tree seat.'

'Here's ane comin', mem,' said the girl, and Lisle came up the steps as she spoke.

'Going to walk,' said that gentleman cheerfully; 'may I come too?'

'Will you not have some luncheon first?'

'No, thank you; I had luncheon early with Finistoun, who dropped me near this on his way to Balmuir. It is quite spring like after the storm last night. It kept you awake I suspect. Your eyes—those loadstone eyes of yours—droop.'

'I did not sleep much certainly. Then, if you will not have any luncheon, we will

go to my favourite point of view, and look at the sea: it will be very fine to-day.'

'By all means.'

'They walked on in silence for some little way, and then Lisle exclaimed,—

'I never was so amazed in my life as when I saw Waring with you! It seemed as if he was to be your fate! What possessed him to come here to singe his wings again, poor devil?'

'Your compassion is wasted,' said Mona, a slight smile curling her haughty mouth. 'Mr Waring is much improved, and seems quite fire-proof.'

'If he is, why he deserves to be called, in your uncle's parlance, "a varra remarkable person."'

'Pray leave my uncle alone,' said Mona, smiling in spite of herself.

'Very well. Where is everyone? Are you all alone?'

'Yes, just at present. Kenneth and Mr Waring have gone to the fisher village, my uncle and Mary to the town.'

'Then the fates are at last propitious!' cried Lisle. 'I have been singularly unlucky as regards yourself of late. Now

pray sit down' (they had reached the rustic bench) 'and hear me. You have slipped from my grasp over and over again; you must hear me to-day.'

Mona cast a troubled look round, and then suddenly took courage, resolving to make an end of the matter.

'Yes,' she said nervously, and somewhat louder than usual, 'I will hear you, Sir St John.'

She sat down, and he placed himself beside her.

'Of course you know what I am going to say. You know—you must know—that I loved you from the first hour we met, and that although in justice to you I made the unselfish effort to recommend your marrying Waring when poor Mrs Newburgh met with such losses, I do not suppose you can form an idea of what it cost me to make such a sacrifice.'

'I am sorry to have caused you pain,' said Mona, in a low, clear tone. 'I am sure your advice was disinterested.'

'It was indeed. I confess I was surprised at the worldly tact with which you adopted my suggestion.'

'I was carefully brought up in a good school,' said Mona demurely.

'No school on earth could have given you the indescribable charm nature has bestowed!' cried Lisle passionately. 'I never loved any woman as I love you! Mona, do hear me. Cast away this cold sweetness, that is enough to madden any man. Give me your love, give me a right to it!' He seized and kissed her hand, which she withdrew. 'There was a time when your hand trembled in mine, and—'

'My nerves are much steadier now,' she said calmly. 'It is treachery to let you say more, when I have nothing to give in return, and it pains me infinitely to pain you, but I cannot be your wife.'

'Then there is some infernal mystery at the bottom of it. First you throw Waring over in the most unaccountable manner; now you reject me. You prefer the awful seclusion of this wild place, the society of these educated ploughmen, to the world my wife could command? Mona, you cannot be indifferent to such

passionate love as mine, unless you love someone else.'

'That does not follow,' she returned uneasily, and very anxious to get rid of him.

'Who is it?' persisted Lisle, who was raging with mortification and disappointment. 'Can it be that the hero of the rejected addresses has found favour in your eyes after all?—a great overgrown schoolboy, who is weak enough to let himself be robbed and plundered by professed gamesters and designing promoters, and then skulks off to hide himself in the wilds of California, like other defeated desperadoes. Your first instinct was right, when you rejected a man who was unfit to be your protector.'

'Stop!' cried Mona, moved by a sudden generous impulse to do justice to the man she loved. 'Your judgment was right. My instinct, if it was instinct, was wrong. Mr Waring deserved my love, and he has it! You are again right, you see. He has shaken off the early feeling which made him so eager

to throw himself between me and the ruggedness of poverty, and I have learned to know him when it is too late. Your confession deserves confidence on my part. I feel I can trust my secret to the loyalty of a gentleman; and though I am not the woman to throw myself at the feet of one who is indifferent to me, as Leslie Waring is now, I am not ashamed to own that he has my gratitude, my respect, my heart, and in it there is no room for another.'

The tone in which she uttered these words, the indescribable dignity and tenderness of her air, of the slight gesture of the hand with which she emphasised her speech—touched and silenced Lisle.

'You are an extraordinary girl,' he said at length; 'and if Waring does not love you (I suppose you must know), it seems incredible. Well, if he does not, I do not despair. You are worth winning. I will not trespass on you any longer; but I will not say good-bye—I shall seek you again when the sea rolls between you and the most

unlucky dog I have ever known or heard of. To be loved by you, and not to know it. What irony of fate! For the present—sweetest and most provoking of women—farewell.'

CHAPTER IX.

THE LAST STATE OF THAT MAN.

'I DINNA ken what's come to ye,' said Uncle Sandy, in very discontented tones, as he pushed away his plate and held out the teacup he had just emptied, to be replenished. 'There canna be better or purer air than at Craigdarroch. It's aye west or south; yet there's Mona wi' a bad headache, wantin' her breakfast in her room, an' Mr Leslie lookin' —nae, but ye look better than ye did yesterday,' glancing at him, 'only ye dinna eat. What's a bit haddie an' a mouthfu' o' toast to stay a mon's stomach i' the mornin'?'

'Oh! I am all the better for my ramble with Kenneth yesterday.'

'You are well-nigh yoursel' again: but I was feared ye'd be goin' too far when I hard ye hadnae come back at tea-time.'

'I left Kenneth because he was going further on. I came back by Monkscleugh and the oak wood. I hope Miss Craig's headache is not very severe.'

'She's more tired like than in pain. She wants quiet. Aweel, she went to bed airly enough,' quoth Uncle Sandy, 'to get it.'

'I daresay she will come down soon. Jessie says there is a new brood of chickens out, Mr Craig,' said Mary. 'Twelve wee birdies, all strong and lively.'

'Ay, that's varra good. Now there's anither fast early train to Glasgow, we'll dispose o' good pairt o' the poultry varra profitably. I'd go down and look at the chuckies, if Mona were here.'

'And wouldn't you take my arm, Mr Craig, for want of a better?' said Mary, blushing very sweetly.

'Yes, I will, my bairnie,' said the old man, looking at her indulgently. Sandy Craig had a great liking for a pretty face. 'We'll go and have a crack wi' the henwife.'

Later, Mona, thinking from the profound stillness that she had the house to herself, came from the seclusion of her own room to the drawing-room. She had been greatly agitated by her interview with Lisle, and greatly distressed, on reflection, to think she had trusted the secret of her love for Waring to a man whom she could not help considering an enemy. Yet she did not quite wish her words unsaid. She wished to honour the man she preferred, in the eyes of the rival who despised him; but she hoped and prayed that the knowledge of this admission might never reach Waring. Perhaps, indeed probably, he had formed some fresh attachment, which held his heart against her. 'After all,' she thought, as she stopped to look at herself in a long glass at the end of the room, and saw that the long straight folds and close-fitting bodice of her dark

blue serge, with the broad band and buckle that showed the easy roundness of her waist, the scarf of old lace round her throat, the soft wavy masses of her reddish gold hair, became her well,—'after all, I am not worse looking than I used to be; but that does not matter.'

With a sigh she opened the piano, and began to play dreamily. How fast the days were slipping away. To-morrow would be his last at Craigdarroch, and then good-bye for ever.

'Is the headache quite gone?' said Waring, coming up behind her.

Mona started, and changed colour.

'Yes, nearly gone. You startled me! I thought you were out.'

She met his eyes as she spoke, and something of indescribable tenderness in them made her heart stand still. She rose and went to the window.

'It is cold and raw to-day,' she said, with a slight shiver.

Returning to the fire, she leant against the mantelpiece. Waring put his arms on the top of a high-backed chair op-

posite her, and said, with a quick sigh,—

'The days cannot be too dark and dreary to suit my spirit. I cannot gather courage enough to think of Monday!'

'It is coming very fast,' said Mona softly, and keeping her eyes fixed on the fire, but feeling that Waring's were fastened on herself.

'Will you think me weak, selfish, worthless, if I *cannot* leave you without saying how dearly I love you! To think how near I came to calling you my wife; and now we are but strangers to each other. Don't you see how bitterly hard it was? Oh! you were right to break with me, if you could not love me. It would have been misery to us both if you could not have loved me. But it was all utter despair at the time! To think that you preferred poverty and the desertion of your relatives to me, and all I could have given you then.'

'Ah, Mr Waring!' cried Mona, covering her face with her hands, 'can you forgive me?'

'I do not reproach you,' he returned.

'I was not worthy of you, or I should not have gone to the bad as I did, because I was disappointed. But when I came back to life from that terrible fever, I felt another man. I felt I had a duty to myself that forbade this unmanly abandonment, and I have been stronger ever since. I was even getting over the painful longing for you. And now we have met, and I am worse than ever. And you, you seem sweeter than ever! I feel as if I could *not* leave you!'

He pushed the chair from him, and came to stand beside her, his eyes full of love and sorrow, his plain face beautified by the spirit that animated him.

The fire of heaven seemed to Mona to have descended on her heart, and filled it with joy unspeakable. She let her hands drop, and, quivering from head to foot, she almost whispered,—

'Then do not leave me.'

'Ah, Mona!' said Waring, drawing close to her, 'do not tempt me to a renewal of suffering! I am too desperately in earnest to be played with; and I dare not hope that you, who rejected me

when I could have given you a life of ease, would share my wild, uncouth home with me now. Sweetest, how dare I hope!'

He drew her gently into his arms.

'Take me with you,' said Mona, raising her eyes to his, and letting him read in them more than words could say.

'My darling! it is more than I can believe! Mona, in our short engagement I do not believe you ever gave me a kiss. If you will give yourself to me now, put your arms round my neck and kiss me of your own free will.'

There was an instant's hesitation, and then her arms stole gently to his neck, and her lips were pressed to the brown cheek he bent to them, but for a second, before his lips were on hers, clinging to them softly, passionately, as if he drew his soul's life from that sweet mouth.

'No, not yet! I cannot let you go yet. Tell me, when did you learn to love me?'

'I cannot tell, Leslie. I have never been indifferent to you since—since I

refused to marry you; and when I saw you, I soon began to think I should like to atone to you.'

'Then is it only pity, perhaps?'

'I do not know what it is,' said Mona, with a sigh, as she rested her head against his shoulder; 'I only know that you must not leave me.'

'And all this time of delicious torture!' cried Waring, 'when I ruled myself with a rod of iron lest I should show you the love that was burning my heart out, you imposed upon me with iciness of mere friendship. No man could have dreamed that there was any warmth under such an exterior.'

'How did you come to speak to me at last?' asked Mona, with a smile.

'It was an inspiration,' said Waring. 'I do not know how many kisses you owe me for the miserable moments I have had here.'

'No more now, dear Leslie,' she said, in a low voice, her cheek growing pale, her frame trembling, as he drew her to him.

'Not one?' he whispered, and he re-

leased her, while his heart beat with the glorious consciousness that she loved as passionately as he did himself. 'I am afraid, Mona,' he resumed, after a delicious silence, 'that your uncle will not like to let you come into the wilds with me. But the place is not really bad; it has been cleared for a considerable time, and—'

'Poor Uncle Sandy!' she interrupted. 'I think he would be willing to give you the best he had; and I am by no means sure he considers me that.'

'Needs must. He will miss you dreadfully.'

'Then will be the opportunity to suggest Mary as my successor.'

'Exactly. Shall I ask Kenneth to join me in making a double demand! You are the ruling spirit here.'

'That would be too much. But, pray, speak to my uncle to-day. He deserves to be told at once.'

. . . . . .

Dinner was got through somehow. Both Kenneth and Mary instinctively felt that something or other had taken

place, the former had a shrewd idea what.

About a couple of hours after the family meal, a knock was heard at the door of Mona's room, where she had entrenched herself till the awful explanation with her uncle had been accomplished.'

'Your uncle wants to speak to you, Mona,' said Waring.

'Oh, Leslie! How is he?'

'The glass is at fair weather. Come along.'

Uncle Sandy was looking pale, and was sitting unusually upright in his arm-chair in the library when Mona, with downcast eyes, and the air of a culprit, came in, closely followed by Waring.

'Aweel,' he said, in a solemn and somewhat tremulous tone, 'I have been hearing what the grandson o' my auld maister has to say. Noo, Mona, my bairn, are you willing to tak this mon to be your wedded husband?'

'I am, uncle,' she said, softly but clearly.

'If ye are, nane has a right to withstan' you. I would be weel content if

ye had not to gae sae far awa' ; and I'll feel your loss sair, but ye maun follow the husband you've chosen.'

'Dear uncle,' said Mona, the tears hanging on her long lashes, 'it will grieve me, too, to leave you ; you have been a father to me, and I thank you.'

She knelt beside him and kissed his thin hand.

'An' a faither I'll be to ye, my lambie. Mrs Leslie, my niece, shall have five thoosan' pounds to her tocher ; and it's glad I'll be that some of my hard earnin's go to the son of the hoose by which I earned it. But I'll be a lonely mon when ye leave me.'

'You need not be, unless you choose. You can have a niece to read to you and write for you, and take care of you. Think of it, uncle dear! Make Kenneth as happy as—as I am.'

'Yes, uncle—for you must let me call you so. There could not be a better or more suitable wife found for Kenneth than the one he has found for himself!' cried Waring.

'Aweel, aweel, I will think of it ;

but, my lad, ye maun promise me you'll bring Mona back to see me ance mair before I die.'

'I do promise you, Uncle Sandy; faithfully promise you.'

The dramatic taste of moderns will not permit that minute distribution of fortune to each character which all well constituted readers ought to demand. None of ours came however to any tragic end, nor was Lisle's confirmed bachelorhood very detrimental to his happiness.

For the satisfaction of that estimable but diminutive portion of the public who would 'ask for more,' the curtain shall go up for a few minutes on the last tableaux.

. . . . . .

Winter and summer had come and gone three times, and a glowing golden autumn was gilding the hills and deepening the purple heather, when Mona and her husband strolled together once more to the seat by the big oak tree.

'After all, Leslie, I believe I love this view the best of any.'

'I am quite sure I do,' said Waring, a smile stealing into his brown eyes and spreading over his healthy, happy face.

'Why are you so fond of it?' asked Mona, settling her head comfortably against his shoulder.

'Because—well, I will tell you a secret, the only one I have had from you.'

'How dare you, sir? Confess at once!'

'Well, I don't think you'll mind now. The day before you deigned to accept me, I had been roaming about with Kenneth and got tired of everything, life included, so I left and strolled up the hollow there till I found myself beside those big stones, where the bracken still grows so high, and I threw myself down amongst them and thought what an unhappy devil I was, when I heard Lisle's voice close by, and before I could stir, you were both seated here. I hesitated, and lost my chance of appearing, until I heard too much to make it advisable to show. Then I listened, and if ever a fellow was lifted into the

highest heaven of pride and delight, I was that day.'

'What! did you hear everything I said?'

'Every word! So that I did not know how to behave myself like a rational creature, and pretended all the evening to be dead tired. You see, it would never have done to let you know. But if I had not heard from your own lips that you liked me—well, better than Lisle, I should never have broken silence.'

'Is it possible? I understand though! It is well you kept the secret. I should have been so awfully vexed.'

'Yes; I knew that.'

'Just imagine my ever having hidden things from you, and being a stranger, and fearing you should look into my heart and see what a goose I was. We could never misunderstand each other *now*, we have grown so like.'

'"As the husband, so the wife is—thou art mated to a clown!"' quoted Waring, laughing.

'Hush!' she interrupted; 'you shall not say impertinent things of my guid

man! But it is nearly half-past four; we must go back. Mary ordered the carriage for us to go and meet General and Mrs Fielden at five, and you know what a punctual little house-mother she is.'

'Very well; but first you might give a fellow a kiss for the sake of old times.'

'Yes, for past and present both, my own dear.'

THE END.

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